

Federal Programs Use Program Assessment Rating Tool

Caigan M. McKenzie
NESC STAFF WRITER

Charles Robinette, special projects coordinator with the West Virginia Bureau of Health, was puzzled by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) request.

"We oversee the Safe Drinking Water Act for the state of West Virginia, and EPA funds the program," he says. "When we report the program's progress to EPA, we give general comments to the questions they ask. In many cases, the answer is 'ongoing' when we are asked about progress in specific phases of the program. This year, though, the type of information that EPA wanted had drastically changed."

Robinette is referring to the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). Administered through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in conjunction with federal agencies, PART was established in 2002 as a tool to evaluate the performance and management of the approximately 1,000 federal programs that are funded each year.

The Parts of PART

PART is a questionnaire composed of 25 questions that are common to all programs. In addition, PART includes customized questions about programs in each of the following program categories: direct federal, competitive grant, block/formula grant, regulatory, capital assets and service acquisition, credit, and research and development.

Questions are divided into four sections and are weighted:

- 20 percent of a program's overall score is determined by answers about a program's purpose and design,
- 10 percent by strategic planning,
- 20 percent by management, and
- 50 percent by results and accountability.

Answers must be supported by verifiable data.

Performance Measurements

More than half of federal programs have not demonstrated results, according to the OMB's first performance assessment process, because measurements were based solely on outputs. To reflect more realistic results, OMB has required that all federal programs measure progress through outcomes, outputs, and efficiency.

"There is a lot of confusion with these terms, particularly between outcomes and outputs," says Craig Mains, a training specialist with the National Environmental Services Center. "Outputs are the internal activities of a program (the products and services delivered). It answers the question: 'What does the program do to achieve its goal or purpose?' For instance, a goal of a watershed training program could be to teach stakeholders how to protect their watersheds. The output measure could be the number of participants in the training program.

"Outcomes are the events or conditions external to the program and of direct importance to the public/beneficiary," Mains continues. "It answers the question, 'What is the program's purpose or goal?' For instance, do water tests taken after a watershed training program show a decrease in pollution?"

Efficiency measures looks at the ratio of inputs to outputs and outcomes. It tries to determine whether or not resources, such as time, effort, and money, are being used in the best possible manner.

Performance Ratings

Based on the answers given in the PART, the OMB will score each section (purpose and design, strategic planning,

A New Measure of Success

management, and results) from zero to 100. These scores are translated into ratings of program performance:

Effective	85–100
Moderately Effective	70–84
Adequate	50–69
Ineffective	0–49

Regardless of its overall score, a rating of “results not demonstrated” is given to a program when it does not have acceptable performance measures or performance data. Federal agencies can appeal the OMB evaluations to the President’s Management Council, a five-person panel composed of deputy secretaries who have management responsibilities at their respective agencies.

Relationship Between Ratings and Funding

Mains points out that a high score does not necessarily translate into increased funding, nor does a low score translate into decreased funding or termination of a program. A program that is rated effective, for instance, may be terminated or have its funding reduced because it has completed its mission, is duplicative of other programs, or is ranked below programs with a higher priority. Conversely, a program that is rated as ineffective may receive additional funding to help it overcome its deficiencies.

Program Follow-Up Actions

One of PART’s primary goals is to help programs, which it does by developing an action plan to improve a program’s performance. Here are some actions for improving a water resources research program that was rated moderately effective:

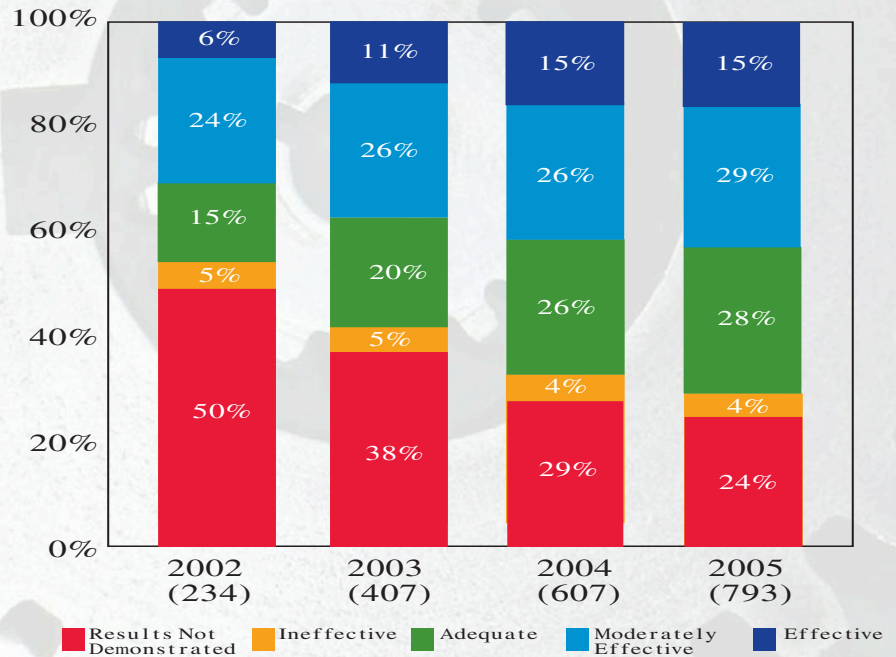


Figure 1: Distribution of Cumulative Ratings per Year

Source: Office of Management and Budget

Examples of Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	Outcomes
Number of people served by water/sewer projects.	Increased percent of people with access to clean drinking water.
Number of acres of agricultural lands with conservation plans.	Percentage of improvement in soil quality; dollars saved in flood mitigation.
Number of businesses assisted through loans and training.	Percentage of businesses that remain viable three years after assistance.

Source: Office of Management and Budget



- Work with other federal agencies on a multi-year plan to coordinate water research.
- Develop shared water research performance measures across agencies.
- Plan regular, independent reviews of the entire water resources research program.

When a program shows significant improvement, it can be reassessed to increase its rating. Even programs that receive the highest ratings have follow-up action plans.

Under PART, federal agencies have become more aggressive in taking the steps necessary to improve program performance and accountability. (See Figure 1.)

Because of PART's success in increasing government accountability, it was one of six winners of the 2005 Innovations in American Government Award, a program of the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

For More Information

For more information about PART, visit the Office of Management and Budget's Web site at www.omb.gov/part. After a program has been "PARTed," draft summaries are automatically generated for public review at www.ExpectMore.gov.

The National Environmental Services Center offers a training course covering PART and its components. To learn more, contact Craig Mains, NESC training specialist, at (800) 624-8301 ext. 5583 or by e-mail at cmains@mail.wvu.edu.

HOW DOES PART AFFECT MY TOWN?

Because PART evaluations are a recent development, it is difficult to predict their long-term impact, especially at the community level. It is likely, however, that some efforts will continue to be made to measure the effectiveness of government programs, including those that are intended to improve small community environmental services.

OMB implements PART review in conjunction with federal agencies that administer government programs. Federal agencies that administer those programs will increasingly be looking to state agencies and nongovernmental organizations that, in turn, receive federal agency funding to provide documentation of their effectiveness. In the past, documentation was typically in the form of outputs—the number of communities assisted, for example. Because PART emphasizes outcome documentation as well as outputs, it is likely that small community assistance organizations and state agencies will feel increasing pressure from federal agencies to better document their outcomes at the local level. The end result may be that small community personnel will receive more requests for information related to the impact of assistance or compliance work.

The "trickle-down" flow of federal funding to small communities may increasingly rely on a "trickle-up" flow of information. Small community personnel such as plant operators and town managers can help by providing documentation of improvements in community conditions to the organizations and agencies that assisted in those improvements.