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# Mission and Operating Environment

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RCED's top management team believes this operating statement reflects what has to be done to meet the needs of Congress. As the top management team sees changes, the operating statement will be updated. Please forward questions and/or suggestions concerning the statement to the Director of Operations, RCED, or call (202) 275-5187.

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# Mission and Operating Environment: RCED at Work

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## A Message From the Assistant Comptroller General, RCED

Making a difference is the real achievement of our people: As the staff in a major GAO division, we in the Resources, Community, and Economic Development Division take pride in helping Congress and executive branch agencies improve government operations. Because Congress uses the results of our work in its decision-making, we take great care to ensure our work's independence, objectivity, thoroughness, and accuracy.

In achieving these results, the expertise, enthusiasm, and commitment of our people are our greatest strengths. Because our professional standards are high, we place special emphasis on the individual training and development of our staff. We recognize and compensate staff on the basis of their performance. Thus, we are committed to providing staff members with challenging assignments and opportunities so that they can perform to their potential. By supporting our staff in these ways, we know that they, in turn, can tackle the challenges and have the impact on government operations, for which GAO is known.

This statement provides a general framework for understanding the Division's operating environment and the policies guiding its work and staff development. It includes information on the Division's mission, guiding principles, and operating goals, as well as the Division's approach to building quality into its work and to maintaining a skilled and motivated work force.



J. Dexter Peach  
Assistant Comptroller General

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## Mission

RCED's mission is to foster improved government operations and programs by providing timely, high-quality products and services to Congress on six key national issues:

- energy,
- environmental protection,
- food and agriculture,
- housing and community development,
- natural resources management, and
- transportation.

RCED's audit responsibilities cover federal departments and agencies, such as the Departments of Agriculture and Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency, that are responsible for administering programs in these issue areas. Activities administered by these entities affect broad segments of private industry and the public as well as other government agencies.

RCED shapes its activities primarily by focusing on known or anticipated information needs of Congress and by identifying important national issues warranting attention. Congressional requests are increasingly becoming the day-to-day road map for RCED's work on diverse, often highly visible, national issues.

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## Guiding Principles

Fundamental to RCED's success in accomplishing its mission are these guiding principles:

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### Top-Quality Audits and Evaluations on Important National Issues Make a Difference

RCED provides Congress and the executive agencies with the results of its work through reports, testimonies, and briefings. Since RCED's products are the end result of its efforts, each one should improve and lead to a better understanding of government operations and, at the same time, enhance GAO's reputation for independence, objectivity, thoroughness, and accuracy.

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- Quality comes first. To meet congressional needs, RCED's top priority is to address the key issues fully, fairly, and constructively.
- Timely responsiveness is essential. RCED staff members strive at all times to communicate with requesters quickly and frequently. Providing Congress with the results of RCED's work when needed is a high priority.
- Professional standards are high. RCED's work is pursued in a manner that commands respect, enhances GAO's reputation, and affects congressional deliberations.

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### RCED's Staff Is Its Greatest Asset

RCED's professional reputation is built on individual competence, dedication, enthusiasm, and commitment. In hiring and promoting staff, RCED values leadership; integrity; and solid analytical, quantitative, and writing skills.

- Teamwork is vital. Teamwork is how RCED gets the job done; RCED—a team made up of individual teams—is itself part of the GAO team.
- Staff development today provides for success tomorrow. RCED staff members are a part of GAO's lifeblood. Recruiting and developing a highly skilled, dedicated, and motivated work force is vital to RCED's and GAO's long-term success. RCED considers it very important that staff receive necessary and pertinent internal and external training. RCED managers and supervisors provide time and direction for each individual's full development.
- RCED staff respect one another. Individuals and teams—evaluators, specialists, and administrative and support staff—work together in an environment of trust and respect.
- RCED is committed to a strong and effective affirmative action program and equal employment opportunities for all staff. Building a work force that represents all the groups of the diverse American population is essential. RCED sets realistic but aggressive affirmative action goals and seeks highly qualified women and minorities at all levels.

Throughout RCED, fair and equal treatment are accorded all staff members.

- RCED staff take pride in improving all aspects of the Division's operations. Through its Operations Improvement Program, RCED welcomes staff ideas for progressive innovations and suggestions for new and better ways to carry out the Division's and GAO's work.
- RCED is committed to creating a healthy working environment for all staff. RCED believes productivity is highly related to the working environment, and wants all RCED staff members to have a suitable, comfortable, and healthful office space in which to work.

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## Managing in Today's Operating Environment

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### RCED's Operating Goals

To manage RCED's resources so that the Division's work is effectively focused and efficiently done.

RCED spends the majority of its resources on assignments that respond to specific congressional needs. In addition, it undertakes assignments addressing issues of special interest to Congress and the Comptroller General in accordance with GAO's basic legislative authority. Meeting this work load requires

- Working closely with key congressional committees to set priorities for the work they want RCED to do and to ensure that the assignments RCED undertakes address the right issues.
- Coordinating with GAO's sister agencies—the Congressional Budget Office, Congressional Research Service, and Office of Technology Assessment—as well as agencies' Inspector General Offices to make sure that RCED's work complements, not duplicates, their work. RCED's ability to draw on these resources helps to focus its efforts. RCED staff

members work closely with congressional staff to redirect requests when the proposed work is more appropriate for one of the sister agencies or the Inspector General to undertake.

- Ensuring that assigned staff have the appropriate skills, expertise, and experience to perform its independent, comprehensive evaluation and that all appropriate GAO resources are brought to bear on RCED's work. RCED staff members coordinate the work, as necessary, internally with RCED's Advanced Technology and Methodology Group as well as with other GAO divisions and staff offices, such as the Offices of General Counsel, Congressional Relations, and the Chief Economist.
- Having accurate information systems for managing RCED's resources and assessing progress against planned objectives.

To provide Congress with products, services, and information that uphold GAO's reputation for independence, objectivity, thoroughness, and accuracy. Responding to congressional needs requires that RCED staff members know the issues and the facts. Obtaining this information firsthand requires considerable contact with

- executive branch officials, to stay abreast of agency plans and objectives for implementing and overseeing federal programs under their jurisdiction;
- state and local government officials, to identify and understand problems they encounter in administering government programs and services;
- businesses, associations, and special interest groups, to determine what impact federal programs are having on their activities and to obtain their views and related information; and
- consultants, "think tanks," and private research organizations, to gain the benefit of their expertise on matters RCED is reviewing.

In analyzing this information, RCED staff members must remain independent, work objectively, and ensure the accuracy and thoroughness of their

work. Additionally, RCED staff members must be prepared to respond to inquiries about RCED's work from the news media and the public at large.

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## Getting the Job Done—A Collaborative Effort

RCED is organized by issue area into six operating groups. Under RCED's operating philosophy of mutual support, staff in all issue areas and at all levels work closely together to accomplish the Division's mission.

RCED's resources are determined through GAO's Issue Area Planning System. The Comptroller General allocates GAO staff-years—headquarters and field—among issue areas and staff offices. These allocations determine the size of RCED and each issue area. RCED's operating budget is based primarily on the funding needs of each issue area for such things as contracting, training, travel, and supplies.

The Assistant Comptroller General, the Issue Area Directors, the Directors of Planning and Reporting and Operations, and the Associate Directors form RCED's top management team. The Issue Area Directors serve as GAO's focal points for all work. They are responsible for carrying out RCED's mission in each issue area, including the fostering of relations with Congress, executive agencies, the media, state and local governments, and the public. The Assistant Comptroller General, supported by the Directors of Planning and Reporting and Operations, oversees the Division's day-to-day management.

Each year, the Assistant Comptroller General, in response to the Comptroller General's guidance, sets overall goals for the Division on the basis of expectations for the year ahead in each issue area. Primary responsibility and accountability for meeting these expectations rests with the individual managers and staff within each issue area. RCED's top management team uses key performance indicators

and daily contacts to oversee the Division's progress and, at the same time, provide the right balance of management attention.

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**Planning and  
Reporting**

The Director of Planning and Reporting works with Issue Area Directors and their staff to ensure that top-quality RCED products are prepared. RCED's staff for Planning and Report Review review all products and provide both broad and specific guidance to RCED staff members on GAO policies and procedures. Reports Analysts and Writer-Editors work closely with the staff members in the issue areas to ensure that RCED's reports are effectively developed and written. RCED's Advanced Technology and Methodology Group—comprising both the Economic Analysis Group and the Design, Methodology, and Technical Assistance group—provides assistance to each issue area in a number of technical fields, such as economics, methodological design, statistics, and survey methods. That group also serves as RCED's liaison with the Office of the Chief Economist and the Program Evaluation and Methodology Division.

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**Operations**

The Director of Operations works with Issue Area Directors, Associates, and their staff to ensure that the issue areas have the necessary staff and resources. RCED's Human Resources Staff oversee the recruitment, assignment, development, utilization, and compensation of staff. RCED's Budget and Administration Staff oversee security, procurements, travel, facilities, equipment, and space needs. RCED's Information Services Staff design, develop, implement, and maintain appropriate management information systems and related reports for managing the Division.

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**Issue Area  
Operating Groups**

Issue Area Directors and Associates, supported by Assistant Directors, ensure that all organizational, staffing, and work goals within each issue area are

accomplished. They plan and use RCED and GAO resources as necessary to get the job done. Determining how the results of RCED's work will be reported is also their responsibility. Although the Director of Operations assigns staff to each Issue Area Director to work in a specific subject area, Directors generally assign staff to individual jobs.

RCED staff members work in teams to accomplish GAO's work in each issue area. Assistant Directors manage several assignments in a specific subject area. Assignment managers help the Assistant Directors and generally manage multiple assignments. Evaluators-in-Charge manage all phases of an assignment, including developing the job plan, directing and coordinating the work, and developing RCED's written products. Evaluators follow sound auditing principles in performing the detailed work in accordance with individual assignment plans.

RCED's top management team highly values the contributions of the administrative and secretarial staff, who support each issue area and the Division's staff offices. Their assistance is vital to the successful accomplishment of RCED's mission.

Staff assigned to RCED's issue areas are located at GAO headquarters and audit sites in or near the departments and agencies being reviewed. Several of RCED's larger sites have an Associate Director on location.

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**Working in  
Partnership With  
Regional Office Staff**

RCED's staff members work in partnership with GAO's regional office staff, relying extensively on the staff in regional offices to perform a majority of its work at field locations. An integral part of the team, regional staff participate in planning RCED's work, executing assignments, and reporting the results. On many RCED assignments, the Evaluators-in-Charge are from the regional offices.

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## Building Quality Into RCED's Work

RCED's top priority is to do quality work. To accomplish this, RCED's work must focus on pressing national issues within each issue area, and it must be conducted effectively and efficiently. It must also be responsive to congressional needs while retaining GAO's reputation for independence, objectivity, thoroughness, and accuracy. RCED builds quality into its work through its comprehensive systems for

- planning within each issue area,
- carrying out assignments, and
- reporting the results of its work.

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## Issue Area Planning and Review

RCED uses the issue area planning system to focus its work on key national issues. This system produces multiyear plans, updates, and annual work plans for each issue area. These documents are important at two levels. They assure the Comptroller General and his staff that GAO's limited resources are being directed to the most important issues and to those areas that enable GAO to make a significant contribution. And, for RCED's top management team, they (1) ensure that the planned work is essential, (2) determine whether approved objectives are being achieved, and (3) enable the Division to modify time frames and objectives quickly when necessary.

In consultation with key congressional committees, executive agencies, and outside experts, staff within the issue areas prepare these plans with active participation from RCED's Advanced Technology and Methodology Group, other divisions, and regional offices. The issue area plan identifies the most important issues facing the nation and the federal government in that subject, establishes broad multiyear objectives for addressing the issues, and defines the approach by which the objectives will be achieved over the next 2 to 4 years. Issue area updates are prepared annually to identify progress made in achieving issue area objectives in the past

year. These updates also identify proposed modifications to the approved issue area plan. Annual work plans define for each issue area specific work for the upcoming fiscal year and link individual assignments to issue area objectives. These work plans help direct future work into areas in which RCED can make the greatest contribution.

RCED's top management team reviews these products to ensure that, among other things, GAO's work will give Congress timely quality products that are fully responsive to its needs, and that the expected results from the planned work will provide an effective basis to measure progress, ensure accountability, and evaluate results.

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### Carrying Out RCED's Assignments

The resources expended for an assignment should be appropriate to the assignment's significance and complexity. RCED normally carries out its assignments in two phases: the survey phase and the implementation, or review, phase.

Assignment teams prepare the resource authorization documents for each phase. The top management team reviews these documents to ensure that RCED's resources are expended effectively and efficiently. RCED's Planning Coordinator and the Advanced Technology and Methodology Group assist RCED's top management team in reviewing all resource authorization documents.

In authorizing resources for surveys, for example, RCED's top management team carefully considers factors such as the significance of the proposed assignment, the subject's consistency with issue area objectives, the assignment's relationship to the annual work plan, and the appropriateness of the estimated expenditure of calendar time and staff-days with the assignment's significance. Similarly, in authorizing resources for implementation, the top management team carefully considers the planned methodology and other factors, such as whether the

proposed resource expenditure is consistent with the survey results and whether the assignment's objectives can be satisfied with fewer resources than proposed.

Issue Area Directors approve resources for most assignment phases, although certain situations, such as assignments exceeding 500 staff-days or 12 months, require the specific approval of the Assistant Comptroller General. Because RCED's review process considers many of the same factors as the Comptroller General and his staff do, resource authorization documents are designed to facilitate their review.

RCED's top management team uses performance indicators from various RCED and GAO management information systems, such as the Congressional Request Tracking System, to monitor each assignment team's progress and results. In addition, at key milestones, the top management team participates in and reviews the status of individual assignments. For example, in implementation, progress reviews occur at the time the assignment plan is complete, when one-third of the staff-days or one-third of the calendar time has elapsed, when the report conference is held, and when the initial draft is completed.

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### Reporting the Results of RCED's Work

Producing clear, thorough, accurate, and balanced products is the goal of RCED's report review process. RCED reports on the results of its work through briefings, written reports, and testimonies. RCED's top management team reviews all reports and testimonies leaving the Division, including draft reports being sent to agencies for comment. RCED's Report Review and Writer-Editor staff collaborate to assist RCED's top management team in improving the overall quality of draft products and help ensure their consistency with GAO's reporting policies and procedures. Each review emphasizes the clarity, tone, and effectiveness of the presentation;

the soundness and convincingness of the positions taken; and the appropriateness and constructiveness of the recommendations.

In keeping with GAO's devolution of authority, Issue Area Directors sign reports that do not contain recommendations and/or matters for congressional consideration. For reports containing recommendations, the Assistant Comptroller General either signs them or approves them to be forwarded to the Comptroller General for signature.

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## Maintaining a Skilled and Motivated RCED Work Force

Although RCED's top priority is to do quality work, the key to its success rests with maintaining a skilled and motivated work force. The Division's greatest strength lies in the dedication, enthusiasm, and commitment of its staff. RCED's top management team is committed to maintaining this strength by providing staff members with challenging assignments and opportunities so that they can perform to their potential. Staff are recognized and compensated on the basis of performance as part of GAO's pay-for-performance system.

The top management team oversees the quality and stability of RCED's work force through: recruiting and hiring, the staff developmental program, staff reassignments, training, performance appraisals, awards, and GAO's annual assessment process.

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## Recruiting and Hiring

Identifying highly qualified candidates for professional positions is vital to RCED's long-term success. RCED places great emphasis on maintaining a well-rounded, highly qualified, multidisciplinary staff to accomplish its mission. RCED seeks candidates with strong analytical, quantitative, writing, interpersonal, and oral communication skills. RCED increasingly recruits students with graduate degrees in public administration or public policy and business administration, as well as in other disciplines such as economics and management.

At the upper level, RCED hires mostly issue area experts or persons with other kinds of needed specialties. RCED periodically reevaluates its need for economists, operations research analysts, social science analysts, and subject matter experts, and searches nationwide for highly qualified candidates.

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RCED's  
Developmental  
Program

RCED's Developmental Program devotes special attention to the career needs of developmental evaluator staff—staff that represent the future of the Division and of GAO. RCED's program ensures that developmental staff receive proper orientation and training, well-rounded assignment experience, good supervision, and a thorough understanding of its issue areas. For example, these staff members attend core entry-level training and work on at least three assignments in different issue areas with different supervisors to optimize their job experiences during the developmental stages of their careers. The program also includes quarterly sessions in which the Directors, Associates, and Assistant Directors from each issue area discuss their areas of responsibility, including current jobs, emerging issues, and congressional concerns.

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Staff Reassignments

The Director of Operations, through the Human Resource Manager, reassigns staff to provide diversified experience for career development, as well as to meet divisional staffing needs. In reassigning staff, the Director works with the Issue Area Directors and Associates and attempts to balance staff members' reassignment preferences and developmental needs with the resource needs arising from RCED's work load.

The appropriate tenure in any one subject or issue area varies. For example, staff members at the management and leadership levels are generally encouraged to make a commitment to a subject area

for a period of 3 to 5 years to allow both the individual and the Division to develop subject matter expertise and continuity in work planning and execution.

RCED wants its staff members to be challenged by their work, take pride in it, and aspire to reach their individual potential. Periodic reassignment gives them the opportunity to achieve their career development goals as well as to improve their chances of successfully competing for jobs through GAO's merit system. GAO's interdivisional Lateral Reassignment Program also provides evaluators and evaluator-related staff members with a means of indicating interest in opportunities throughout GAO.

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## Training

Internal and external training complements on-the-job training RCED staff members receive. RCED considers all types of training important—whether they are programs sponsored by GAO's Training Institute; RCED internal programs; or RCED-funded job-related seminars, conferences, and college-level programs—and encourages all staff members to attend training as another way to improve their abilities.

RCED is increasingly turning to automated information to carry out its mission. Developing the staff skills to use computers and related software is becoming increasingly important. RCED's goal is for all staff members to become proficient in using computers to acquire or create data quickly; edit, store, and share data, texts, and drafts more efficiently; and create, transmit, and file a wide range of staff and assignment management documents electronically.

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## Individual Training Plans

Individual Training Plans serve as the basis for determining staff training needs in RCED. Annually, all staff—professional and administrative—

prepare a plan for the current year and the following 2 years that identifies "core" and "elective" training needs and requests for training. Core training is geared to each staff member's performance level. In keeping with the "yellow book" requirements, RCED's goal is for each staff member to devote 40 hours per year to training-related activities.

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Management and  
Executive  
Development  
Training

GAO's Executive Resources Board has the overall responsibility for developing GAO's present and future managers and executives through executive and managerial training programs. The Assistant Comptroller General annually nominates several individuals from among RCED's high-potential managers to attend executive courses sponsored by business and government organizations and by universities. GAO's Executive Resources Board selects the attendees. RCED's senior executives and staff members in the leadership and management levels can be nominated.

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Performance  
Appraisals

GAO has several different systems for appraising the performance of its professional and administrative staff. For example, staff in evaluator and evaluator-related positions are appraised using GAO's Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS). Within RCED, the performance appraisal for everyone consists of three mandatory processes: expectation setting, performance monitoring, and performance appraisal and counseling.

Since setting expectations is a vital component of the performance appraisal cycle, RCED's top management team requires supervisors to set expectations for all staff members at least once a year. Supervisors are responsible for monitoring their staff's performance and providing them with periodic progress reviews, including coaching and counseling, as well as with feedback on their work. Supervisors also prepare performance appraisals

for their staff and explain how they determined the appraisal.

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### Annual Assessment

Each year, GAO formally assesses the performance and potential of its staff. During this annual assessment process, RCED management recommends staff for awards, bonuses, and permanent pay increases; and assesses their potential for promotion. RCED promotion opportunities are arrived at through an annual needs determination process. Promotion selections are made from a list of staff members, determined solely on the basis of merit, to be "best qualified."

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### Incentive Awards

Incentive awards are granted to recognize outstanding and significant staff accomplishments, contributions, and performance. Within RCED, the following types of awards are granted: Assistant Comptroller General's Award, Outstanding Achievement Awards, Special Commendation Awards, and Operations Improvement Awards. Staff are also nominated to receive special awards and GAO officewide awards.





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