Measuring Our Nation’s Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability

What Participants Said

Forum participants discussed potential criteria to help in developing environmental accounts, lessons learned from the international community, and strategies for overcoming challenges. Participants also made general observations about developing these accounts and discussed next steps.

Suggested Criteria to Help in Developing Environmental Accounts

Participants suggested four broad criteria to use in determining what components of environmental accounting should be developed. These criteria were identifying the objective of the accounts, considering the availability and quality of data, ensuring that accounts provide information on current natural wealth, and considering the timeliness and regularity with which accounts can be produced. Participants generally agreed that pollution and material flow accounts, which provide industry-level information about the generation of pollutants and solid waste and energy and material use, are most critical for the United States to develop first.

Lessons Learned from the International Community

Participants shared the following lessons learned from other countries’ experiences in developing environmental accounts:

- **Provide data in a timely manner.** To be useful to decision makers, environmental accounting data must be timely.
- **Political interest can wax and wane.** Shifting political agendas can affect policymakers’ interest in environmental accounting.
- **Environmental accounting is a long-term investment.** Developing accounts requires a sustained effort over an extended period.

Strategies for Overcoming Key Challenges

Participants broadly agreed that the greatest challenge to developing environmental accounts in the United States is the need for support from policymakers and others. Other key challenges include institutional differences based on agencies’ varying missions; the need for funding; data availability, compatibility, and reliability; and methodological uncertainty. Participants suggested the following strategies, among others, for overcoming these challenges:

- **Identify policymakers, experts, and others who support the effort.**
- **Build an economic business case for environmental accounting.**
- **Use an incremental approach.**
- **Take the time necessary to develop high quality accounts.**

General Observations and Next Steps

Participants generally agreed that developing environmental accounts is important for both our nation’s environmental and economic sustainability. Several participants offered to be partners in an effort to develop U.S. environmental accounts but noted that they would need congressional support and a designated lead agency to spearhead the effort.