STRATEGIC FORESIGHT IN THE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

A SURVEY OF METHODS, RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this presentation are the professional opinions of the authors and study participants: they have not been cleared by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or the U.S. federal government.

Project Goals

- Improve strategic foresight methods and the integration of foresight work into strategic planning and management at EPA

- Share what we have learned with other federal agencies to support foresight efforts across the government
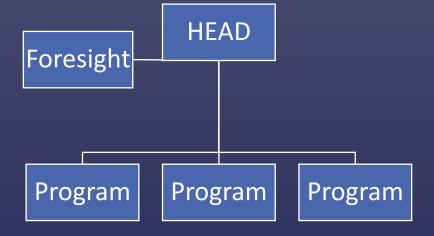
Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews with people involved in foresight at 19 federal agencies and two non-federal organizations. Explored:
    - history of each foresight program
    - how the program is organized
    - what methods are used
    - how foresight is connected to planning
    - and what aspects of the effort have worked best and might be recommended to others
- Interview summaries, follow-up questions, and draft report provided to each person interviewed to validate the information, report findings, and solicit ways to improve the report
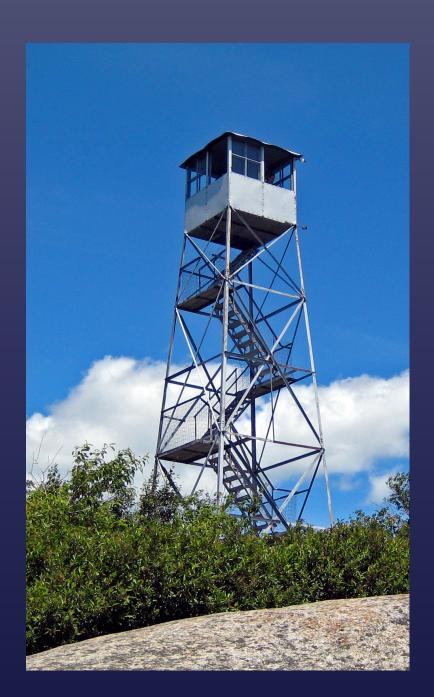
Key Findings

1. No standard organizational location for a foresight function

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- "Off to the side at the top" may be best

- Most programs have a core group of 0.5 to 2 FTE of staff time devoted to managing foresight efforts

- Most use contractor support and some have created foresight Communities of Practice that involve larger numbers of people

2. Horizon scanning is the most commonly used foresight method

- Viewed as valuable in itself and also the prerequisite for developing scenarios
  - Much of the value of horizon scanning lies in being aware early on of emerging problems and opportunities and noticing important developments that are outside the margins of current thinking and planning
- Most programs try to look ahead about 20 years, although there is considerable variability across federal agencies in their forward-looking timeframe

3. Scenarios are the other most widely used method

- Most common use is as a tool for strategic planning
- Most developed foresight programs use scenarios as the centerpiece for a multi-step process that goes from:

Scanning	→	Scenario Development	→	Imperatives for succeeding in future scenarios	→	Goals and Strategies for Organization's Strategic Plan

4. Involving organizational leadership in strategic foresight is critical

- Few agencies believe they have been fully successful

- Approaches include:
  - Engaging leaders in foresight processes and strategic conversations
  - Sounding out leaders about their interest in different topics
  - Developing effective ways of reporting on findings

5. Few agencies have effectively integrated foresight into planning and management processes

- The most successful efforts have been done in ways that fit their different organizational structures and cultures

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers one of the best models: its foresight program is the foundation of its planning efforts and is located within the organizations responsible for enterprise risk management

6. Foresight work would be more likely to be sustained if there was a central body within the federal government that supports it.

- Office of Management and Budget might play this role

    - Encouraging or requiring strategic foresight
    - Providing training

Conclusions: a fully developed foresight program likely would:

- Be located "off to the side at the top" or in the part of the organization responsible for strategic planning
- Involve a continuing, systematic process, not a one-off or occasional effort
- Address a broad cross section of the organization's mission and functions
- Involve a core foresight team with participants from across the organization
- Regularly use horizon scanning as the foundation for periodic scenario planning to look ahead far enough to at least get beyond short-term organizational politics
- Regularly share results with and involve senior management
- Be formally connected to the whole range of an organization's planning activities

Recommendations for Success

- Get buy-in and participation from your senior leadership
- Make identifying core team members with the needed knowledge, bent of mind and interest a top priority
- Partner with other operating units in your organization in conducting studies and involve senior, long-time employees with contacts throughout the organization
- Have scenarios and other work products reviewed by several people inside and outside the organization; then have a Contributor's Page that lists them all
- Develop vignettes to make scenarios more vivid
- Draw on the foresight work of other organizations and invite them to make presentations at your agency (e.g., National Intelligence Council, *The Paradox of Progress*)
- Work with other agencies to build Foresight Training into curriculum (e.g., OPM, the Federal Executive Institute)

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