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CENTER FOR RISK MANAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Shortly after becoming director of the Center for Risk Management, I announced that one of my goals was to involve the center more in evaluating government programs. In October 1994, we started two major new projects, both of which are broad efforts in program evaluation. The first project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is an overall evaluation of the pollution-control regulatory system in the United States. The second project, funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), is an empirical look at the factors that promote or hinder the use of scientific information in the regulatory process. I hope that these two projects are just the beginning of making the center a major source of environmental program evaluation work.

Program evaluation is and always has been an essential element of rational policymaking. It does not take the proverbial rocket scientist to figure out why policy decisions should be based on knowledge of which policies work and which don't. Analysis tells you what needs to be changed, what tools are useful in what contexts, and what pitfalls may lead to policy failure.

Despite the importance of research that analyzes the success or failure of government efforts, very little such research is actually done. There are two basic reasons for this, neither of which is mysterious or subtle. First, some institution has to put up the money to pay for the research; not many institutions have an incentive to finance research that may call into question programs or policies that the institution itself supports. Both the Mellon Foundation and EPA deserve credit for having the courage to support the new center projects.

The second reason for the scarcity of evaluation research is that the organization that undertakes it also often "pays" in other ways. It pays in the form of alienated funding sources, angry constituents, and lost access because honest evaluations usually contain both good and bad news and are likely to be upsetting to at least some important groups.

The Center for Risk Management is well positioned to do program evaluation. Our research staff has the requisite skills, our reputation for honest nonadvocacy research makes it likely that our work will be perceived as credible, and we have enough faith in our funding sources to believe that they will see our efforts as a useful contribution to the policy debate. We are aware that doing evaluation work is a risk for the center. But then managing risk is our primary work.

As you will see in this newsletter, a lot has been going on at the center. In addition to the two initiatives discussed above, at the end of the fiscal year we received a third major grant. Kate Probst was awarded \$390,000 from EPA's Superfund and Policy offices to analyze, among other things, the land use aspects of the Superfund program. She will be reporting on her research in a future issue of this newsletter.

As always, I welcome comments or suggestions from our readers. Many of you are getting the newsletter for the first time, and I hope that you share my belief that the center is making a useful and important contribution to public policy.

Terry Davies