

Chapter

# 3

**Reporting on Sustainable  
Development**

Is the System Working?

*The audit work reported in this chapter was conducted in accordance with the legislative mandate, policies, and practices of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada. These policies and practices embrace the standards recommended by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.*

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# Reporting on Sustainable Development

## Is the System Working?

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### Main Points

**3.1** This is the Commissioner's third annual report on federal departments' reporting of progress toward sustainable development. For the period ending 31 March 2000, the 28 departments and agencies that we monitor reported that they had met an average of about 35 percent of the commitments in their sustainable development strategies. This represents progress from the 20 percent reported in 1999, and 11 percent in 1998.

**3.2** The Treasury Board Secretariat annually publishes *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports*; this document provides guidance on the structure and contents of the annual performance reports, including reporting on sustainable development strategies. The Secretariat encourages departments to follow the Guidelines carefully and to continue improving the quality of their performance reporting. While we found that more departments were following the Guidelines' requirements for reporting on sustainable development strategies than in previous years, few follow them in their entirety. This inhibits Parliament's ability to hold departments to account for their progress in meeting the objectives and implementing the plans set out in their sustainable development strategies.

**3.3** In our view, the Privy Council Office needs to strengthen the present governance structure by ensuring that departments are aware of the priority that the government has placed on sustainable development and that they understand the role they are expected to play, including their obligation to report progress.

### Background and other observations

**3.4** In 1995, the *Auditor General Act* was amended to create the position of Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. One duty of the Commissioner is to monitor and report on the progress of departments toward sustainable development. To this end, departments are required to prepare sustainable development strategies and table them in the House of Commons. The first such strategies were tabled by December 1997.

**3.5** The Act requires ministers to update their sustainable development strategies at least every three years. The second strategies were tabled in the House of Commons in February 2001.

**3.6** This chapter reflects our experience of monitoring the first round of sustainable development strategies. Our observations and recommendations focus on areas that require further improvement in reporting progress on the second round of strategies.

The Privy Council Office agrees with the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development that meaningful performance reports, including the monitoring of progress toward sustainable development, play an important role in the government's accountability to Parliament. The Privy Council Office, through its participation on interdepartmental committees on sustainable development, will emphasize this importance and encourage departments to improve, where necessary, on their reporting.

The Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat will encourage departments and agencies to continue to explore innovative approaches for enhancing intra- and interdepartmental information sharing on sustainable development.

## Introduction

**3.7** The position of Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development was created by amendments to the *Auditor General Act* in 1995. The Commissioner's duties under the *Act* are, among other things, to monitor and report annually to Parliament on the extent to which departments have met the objectives and implemented the plans set out in their sustainable development strategies.

**3.8** By December 1997, 28 departments and agencies had tabled their first sustainable development strategies in the House of Commons. With the creation of the Parks Canada Agency as a separate entity in 1999, there are now 29 strategies (see Exhibit 3.1). The Commissioner monitors 28 of the strategies; the strategy of the Office of the Auditor General was not included in this audit.

### It's about accountability to Parliament

**3.9** Performance reports play a key role in the government's accountability to Parliament. Parliament provides resources and authorities to government departments to provide services to Canadians. It is important that the departments' reports be balanced, reliable, and credible, and communicate clearly what Canadians are getting for their tax dollars. Performance information should identify shortfalls relative to public commitments and indicate, where appropriate, how they are being addressed.

**3.10** Our findings are consistent with the December 2000 Report of the Auditor General. In Chapter 19, Reporting Performance to Parliament: Progress Too Slow, we assessed the strengths and weaknesses in the federal regime for reporting on performance by examining the Estimates documents of 47 departments and agencies over a period of four to five years. We reported that federal departments and agencies had made some progress in reporting on their performance to Parliament, but that we were disappointed in the pace. While that chapter reported a government-wide audit of the status of performance reporting and its progress, our focus in this chapter is restricted to departments' reporting on their sustainable development strategies.

### Focus of the audit

**3.11** A sustainable development strategy, as defined in the *Auditor General Act*, includes a department's objectives and plans of action for furthering sustainable development. These are public commitments, and departments are expected to report annually on their progress in their departmental performance reports, normally delivered in the fall.

**3.12** Our objective in conducting our monitoring work was to determine whether the performance information that departments provide is adequate to allow members of Parliament and Canadians to know whether the departments' strategies are on track. In so doing, we also assembled and

**Exhibit 3.1 Departments and agencies that tabled a sustainable development strategy**

**Departments and agencies required by legislation to table a strategy**

- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Canada Customs and Revenue Agency
- Canadian International Development Agency
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada
- Canada Economic Development Agency for Quebec Regions
- Environment Canada
- Finance, Department of
- Fisheries and Oceans
- Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Department of
- Health Canada
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
- Industry Canada
- Justice, Department of
- National Defence
- Natural Resources Canada
- Parks Canada Agency
- Public Works and Government Services Canada
- Solicitor General Canada
- Transport Canada
- Treasury Board Secretariat
- Veterans Affairs Canada
- Western Economic Diversification Canada

**Departments and agencies that voluntarily tabled a sustainable development strategy**

- Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency
- Correctional Service Canada
- Office of the Auditor General of Canada
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police

reviewed summary-level information on the progress reported by departments.

**3.13** To help Parliament know whether departments are doing what they said they would do, we reviewed their progress by comparing the goals,



objectives, targets, and actions outlined by each department in its 1997 strategy with the information contained in its performance report for the period ending 31 March 2000. These departmental performance reports were tabled in the House of Commons on 1 February 2001.

**3.14** To determine whether departments' performance information is adequate for parliamentary oversight, we audited the sustainable development strategy information in the departmental performance reports for compliance with the concepts articulated in the Treasury Board Secretariat *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports*. We requested copies of any additional, more detailed progress reports that the departments had referenced therein.

**3.15** Because we were assessing the adequacy of information provided to Parliament, we restricted our audit to the departmental performance reports and the documents they clearly referred to that are intended to inform parliamentarians.

**3.16** We did not audit the reliability or accuracy of performance information in the departmental performance reports. This will be the subject of future work. Additional details on the audit can be found in About the Audit at the end of the chapter.

## Observations and Recommendations

### Departmental action

#### What ministers and their departments were asked to do

**3.17** The annual departmental performance reports should provide Parliament with information on how the government manages its expenditures. They are also the primary means by which Parliament and others can monitor the progress of departments toward sustainable development.

**3.18** Good reporting on performance strengthens accountability and trust in government. Adequate information allows better parliamentary scrutiny and demonstrates whether a department is learning from past experience and adapting accordingly.

**3.19** The Treasury Board Secretariat document *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports* states, "The purpose of reporting on the sustainable development strategies is to apprise parliamentarians of progress made against commitments since the strategies [were] submitted." (See Exhibit 3.2.)

**3.20** The section of the Guidelines that pertains to sustainable development strategies directs departments to report the following information in a brief narrative or listing of about a half-page in length:

- key goals, objectives, long-term targets;

**Exhibit 3.2 Guidelines for the preparation of departmental performance reports**

The purpose of reporting on the sustainable development strategies is to apprise parliamentarians of progress made against commitments since the strategies were submitted. Updates or further development of components of the strategies should be noted.

To facilitate reporting and encourage a logical flow of information, departments should report the following information in a brief narrative, or listing, of about a half-page in length:

- key goals, objectives, long-term targets;
- performance indicators or performance results measurement strategy;
- targets for the reporting period;
- progress to date; and
- corrective action, if any.

Background information and supporting details can be provided in an annex or by directing the reader to the departmental Web site.

Commitments that are shared across departments should be noted and interdepartmental discussions should be held to ensure consistency in reporting. Substantial investment of resources in the strategies as a whole, or specific initiatives, when identifiable, could also be highlighted.

Sources of additional information (e.g. reports, other publications, and Web addresses) should be included, when available.

Source: Treasury Board Secretariat, adapted from *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports to Parliament*, for the period ending 31 March 2000

- performance indicators or performance results measurement strategy;
- targets for the reporting period;
- progress to date;
- corrective action, if any; and
- sources of additional information, such as reports, other publications, and Web addresses, when available.

We believe that this framework provides a sound basis for accountability.

**What departments did**

**3.21** Departments reported that they had met an average of about 35 percent of the commitments in their strategies. This indicates modest progress from 1999, when departments reported meeting 20 percent of their commitments, and from 1998, when they reported meeting about 11 percent of their commitments.

**3.22** However, we are concerned about the adequacy of the performance information provided to Parliament because we found that few departments are following the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines. In our opinion, poor reporting practices inhibit Parliament's ability to exercise oversight and hold departments to account for their performance.

**3.23 Adherence to the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines.** We wanted to determine the extent to which departments provided adequate information to permit members of Parliament and Canadians to know whether the departments' strategies are on track. Therefore, we audited the performance information reported by departments for compliance with the six required elements specified in the Guidelines.

**3.24** We observed that the half-page limit suggested in the Guidelines does not appear to provide sufficient space to cover all of the required elements. This is the case particularly since references to additional information are not included.

**3.25** In our view, referencing more detailed information is a necessary compromise between the need for brevity in the summary-level departmental performance reports and the requirement for detailed, credible evidence for results achieved. We found that most departments devoted a full page or more to their sustainable development strategies in their performance reports. However, in most instances, we relied on the supplementary information that departments had referenced to give us a good understanding of progress toward sustainable development.

**3.26** We found that departments' adherence to the Guidelines varied widely. In 1999 we reported that only 3 of the 28 departments provided all of the performance information specified in the Guidelines, including reference to more detailed information. This year, only seven departments provided all of the specified information (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Correctional Service Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, National Defence, Natural Resources Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada, and Solicitor General Canada). Thus, three quarters of departments did not fully comply with the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines (see Exhibit 3.3).

**Exhibit 3.3 Sustainable development progress reports varied widely**

<b>Number of departments in compliance with the Treasury Board Secretariat Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports</b>							
Guidelines elements complied with (out of 6)	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
Number of departments (out of 28) in compliance	7	4	5	2	5	2	3
Percentage of departments in compliance	25	14	18	7	18	7	11

### Some departments show it can be done

**3.27 Leading departments.** A number of departments demonstrated good reporting practices: Industry Canada, National Defence, Natural Resources Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada, and Solicitor General Canada. These departments presented clear information on their

progress, using charts, which largely fulfilled the Treasury Board Secretariat's requirements. The departments addressed all of the targets for the reporting period and provided their own assessment of their progress as well as some information to support their claims. For the most part, the reports supplied an appropriate level of detail, a clear picture of what departments were doing to accomplish their commitments, and an indication of the extent to which the strategies were on track.

**3.28** In Chapter 2 of this Report, we note that Industry Canada, National Defence, and Natural Resources Canada have well-functioning management systems for implementing the commitments in their strategies. Likewise, Public Works and Government Services Canada has initiated many of the elements of a management system to implement its commitments. Last year, we reported that Solicitor General Canada was well on the way to establishing good management and control practices for implementation of its strategy. Thus, our preliminary conclusion is that a good management system is required for good reporting.

**3.29** Chapter 2 also raises questions about the reliability of performance information in reports, given the lack of monitoring procedures in many departments. A good management system facilitates a continuous cycle of monitoring, reporting, and corrective action that an ad hoc approach cannot support. Without appropriate monitoring procedures, a department is not able to effectively manage and track (let alone report on) progress toward sustainable development commitments.

## Reporting

### Range of weaknesses in reporting

**3.30** We found many instances of non-compliance with the concepts articulated in the Guidelines; some departments did not report on their commitments in any detail, while others provided ambiguous information on progress. Even some of the departments that met the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines exhibited some weaknesses in reporting.

**3.31 Non-reporting.** Of the 28 departments we monitor, 4 of them (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canadian International Development Agency, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and Western Economic Diversification Canada) did not report on progress against their commitments in their departmental performance reports or refer to supplementary information. The sustainable development commitments made by these four organizations represent 22 percent of the total number of departmental commitments. This represents a serious gap in reporting.

**3.32** With the exception of Western Economic Diversification Canada, these organizations provided a preview of their second sustainable development strategies rather than reporting on their first ones. Not only have they failed to report on their performance last year, these departments

appear to have moved on without having clarified the status of their 1997 sustainable development strategies.

**3.33** Two of the departments (Canadian International Development Agency and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) told us that they had reported progress throughout their departmental performance reports. However, we were not able to readily match reported progress to their sustainable development commitments. In our view, this approach to reporting is not in keeping with the purpose of a special section devoted to sustainable development in the departmental performance reports. Such broad-based reporting makes it difficult for a reader to determine the progress that has been made against the commitments set out in the departments' sustainable development strategies.

**3.34 Failure to report on all commitments.** Of the 28 departments we monitor, the majority did not report on all their sustainable development commitments and therefore did not provide a complete progress report.

**3.35 No supplementary information.** About half of the departments referenced sources of supplementary information in their departmental performance reports. We relied on these sources to provide the detailed information we needed to understand progress on each commitment. Thus, for the other half of the departments that did not provide sufficient information, we could not determine the extent to which their strategies were on track or how well their action plans were being implemented.

**3.36 Invalid and outdated references.** Of the departments that did refer to supplementary information, two (Department of Justice, Canada Customs and Revenue Agency) provided Web addresses that were invalid, and another (Health Canada) had links to outdated information—the 1997–98 progress report. These departments need to be more careful in providing up-to-date and valid electronic links to information.

**3.37 Unreferenced supplementary information.** We requested that departments supply us with copies of the supplementary information they had referenced in their performance reports. One agency (Parks Canada) sent us a draft document that provided clear, relevant performance information in an easily read chart. However, we could not consider this information in our assessment of its progress reporting because it had not been referenced in the Agency's Performance Report. Parliamentarians would therefore not have been aware of the existence of the additional information. We encourage Parks Canada Agency to continue producing such informative reports and to reference them in future departmental performance reports.

**3.38** In another example, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada sent us a large number of reports that had not been referenced. We could not consider them in our assessment for the same reason that we could not consider the report from Parks Canada Agency. Moreover, in contrast to the clear and relevant draft report provided by Parks Canada, it would take considerable effort for a member of Parliament to glean relevant progress information from reports not originally intended for that purpose.

**3.39** Other departments (Finance and Canada Customs and Revenue Agency) provided the requested supplementary information as late as the end of March, two months after the tabling of the departmental performance reports. Again, a delay of this length would hamper Parliament's ability to hold departments to account.

**3.40 Vague reporting.** In some cases, departments report progress in ambiguous or confusing terms. This can mislead readers by masking a department's real progress. For example, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) made a commitment to "facilitate and support discussions among OGDs [other government departments] and provincial governments." The Agency reported, "ACOA has participated in the Interdepartmental Network on Sustainable Development Strategies since its inception." The reported progress addresses part of the commitment to communicate with other government departments but leaves readers wondering what happened to the discussions with provincial governments. In another example, Transport Canada made a commitment to implement "emergency plans at all sites by 1999." The Department reported this target as met. The accompanying text states that "of the 20 airport facilities Transport Canada was operating in 1999, all have environmental emergency plans in place. Airports with the highest risk for environmental incidents have been identified, and priority has been given to establishing plans at these sites. In the next year, the department will be evaluating the need for environmental emergency plans at other sites such as ports and office facilities." In this case, readers do not know the status of emergency plans at all sites that require them, other than airports.

**3.41** Occasionally, departments report progress that does not address their original commitments. In one example, Canadian Heritage made a commitment to "investigate subsidizing the use of transit and ceasing to provide subsidized parking." Rather than reporting on the status of its investigation, the Department reported the following progress to date: "Activities during Environment Week 1999 included a Commuter Challenge whereby departmental employees were invited to sign in and commit to not using their car to come to work for one day or one week." This leaves readers to speculate on whether the Department still intends to investigate subsidies or whether it considers the reported action as having fulfilled the original commitment. It is also not clear whether the Commuter Challenge extended in any form beyond Canadian Environment Week.

**3.42** Some departments report accomplishments that can be easily misconstrued. For example, Public Works and Government Services Canada made a number of commitments to "comply with federal regulations." The Department reported that it had met these commitments and stated, "No regulatory infractions [were] incurred or warning letters received . . ." In our view, the Department's claim that it had not received notice of any infractions fell short of providing assurance that the Department was in compliance with regulations. Rather, we would expect the Department to report how it exercises due diligence in this respect.

**3.43 Use of acronyms and jargon.** Departments sometimes overuse acronyms and abbreviations that may confuse readers or mean nothing to them. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade committed to "negotiate global agreement on POPs under UNEP auspices." The Department reported having completed this action. It explained that "Canada is currently drafting the necessary implementing regulations under CEPA 1999 with a view to allowing Canada's accession to the PIC Convention in mid-fall 2000 on the occasion of the 7<sup>th</sup> session of INC/PIC—Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Preparation of the Conference of Parties of the Rotterdam Convention for the Application of the PIC Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade scheduled for 30 October–3 November 2000 in Geneva." Although some of the acronyms and abbreviations are explained in various places in the Department's progress report, others are not.

**3.44** We suggest that the use of acronyms be kept to a minimum in departmental performance reports. This would correspond with the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines advising that departmental performance reports must be accessible to a broad audience and easily read by all, not just by government officials.

**3.45 Reporting dates varied.** Although the departmental performance reports state that they were "for the period ending 31 March 2000," 12 of the 28 departments we monitor reported on progress or referred to supplementary reports that went beyond that date by up to five months. This variance in reporting dates makes it hard for parliamentarians to assess progress. We liken it to holding a race with different finish lines for each participant.

**3.46 Focus on activities rather than results.** Following tabling of the 1997 departmental performance reports, the Treasury Board Secretariat, with other departments and agencies, did technical assessments of all 78 performance reports (including departments and agencies not required to table sustainable development strategies). In addition, they conducted peer reviews of 28 reports and a survey of members of Parliament and House of Commons research staff to determine the usefulness of the reports. They wanted to know, "What works and what needs to be improved?" They reported in the *Good Practices Guide*, a companion to the 1998 Guidelines, that parliamentarians and evaluation and policy specialists unanimously responded that, among other things, good departmental performance reports should focus more on performance results and outcomes than on activities.

**3.47** We believe that results matter to Canadians. Yet departments continue to focus their reporting more on activities and outputs, such as attending meetings and developing policies, than on performance results and outcomes. For example, one of Environment Canada's goals was to "give Canadians tools to make sound decisions in a changing environment." An objective associated with this goal was to "increase efforts aimed at environmental education and communication." In its summary progress report for 1999–2000, the Department highlighted various activities. These included ongoing work in the "development and implementation of issue-specific strategic and



operational communications plans for priority files such as clean air, CEPA [*Canadian Environmental Protection Act*], and species at risk," a strategic review of the Department's Web site, consultations, and a number of community action and partnership projects. While these activities may be worthwhile, the Department did not provide a clear indication of the extent to which it has actually achieved its goals.

**3.48 Failure to report on variances.** Only two organizations (Canada Customs and Revenue Agency and Correctional Service Canada) provided insight into why their sustainable development strategies were not on track. Both organizations cited competing priorities and the lack of financial resources and personnel as impediments to implementing their sustainable development strategies. In our view, this approach is more credible than reports that focus only on "good news" and avoid any mention of performance that did not meet expectations.

### The bottom line—accountability

**3.49** Departments are obliged to report on their progress toward sustainable development and to account for their results to Parliament and the Canadian public. The Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines document specifies the elements and approaches to ensure credible reporting. Our audit showed that few departments are following this guidance fully. Consequently, Parliament is not receiving the information that it needs to hold the government to account. Our monitoring of the first round of sustainable development strategies over three years indicates that this is a chronic problem. We expect that this situation will not improve without intervention by a central agency.

**3.50** The Secretariat's *2001–02 Estimates—A Report on Plans and Priorities* states, "The Treasury Board provides advice to the government on how its resources should be managed, and ensures that Parliament and Canadians have the information needed to hold the government accountable." The Secretariat has defined its role as limited to providing advice and encouragement to departments rather than enforcing the Guidelines.

**3.51** The Privy Council Office's role is to promote good governance and accountability in the government, and to ensure that departments are aware of the priority that the government has placed on sustainable development.

**3.52** Until departments follow the Guidelines, Parliament cannot rely on the departmental performance reports to determine whether the strategies are on track or whether departments and agencies are making progress toward sustainable development.

**3.53 Recommendation.** The Privy Council Office should ensure that departments are aware of the priority that the government has placed on sustainable development and that they understand the role they are expected to play, including their obligation to report progress.



**Government's response.** *To assist departments and agencies in their effort to support their ministers' direct accountability to Parliament, the Treasury Board Secretariat develops guidelines for departmental performance reports for reporting on the progress of all programs, including sustainable development. The departmental performance report guidelines have been revised for the current year to better emphasize the focus on results and outcomes, to enhance the quality of information, and to strengthen the linkages between resource allocation and results. Recognizing the diversity of departmental programs and activities, the revised guidelines also allow for departmental or agency discretion on content and format to best provide meaningful, results-based performance information. This is particularly applicable to horizontal activities such as sustainable development. For example, some departments may choose to report their progress within their various business lines, while others may choose a discrete reporting format.*

*The Privy Council Office agrees with the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development that meaningful performance reports, including the monitoring of progress toward sustainable development, play an important role in the government's accountability to Parliament. The Privy Council Office, through its participation on interdepartmental committees on sustainable development, will emphasize this importance and encourage departments to improve, where necessary, on their reporting. The Privy Council Office will also explore additional means to help ensure that senior management is aware of the priority that government has placed on sustainable development, including the obligation to report. It should also be recognized that in order for information that is either included or referenced in the departmental performance report to be meaningful, departments need to achieve an appropriate level of detail while maintaining a focus on results. The Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat will encourage departments and agencies to continue to explore innovative approaches for enhancing intra- and interdepartmental information sharing on sustainable development.*

## Looking ahead

**3.54** Following the tabling of the second round of sustainable development strategies in February 2001, our Office initiated a project to work with a group of departments that table strategies to establish an inventory of each department's new commitments. To start, we developed a common structure based on a hierarchy of goals, objectives, targets, and actions. Definitions were then written for each level of the hierarchy. Next, we classified each commitment appropriately, and asked the departments to verify the results. Finally, all departments were provided with copies of their inventories. In this way, departments will know precisely what the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development will be monitoring, and they can report on progress accordingly.

**3.55** We expect that as more departments establish management systems to deal with their environmental and sustainable development issues (see Chapter 2), better performance information will be more readily available for departments to include in their annual performance reports. With well-functioning management systems, the establishment of their commitments

inventory, and increased adherence to the concepts articulated in the Treasury Board Secretariat's Guidelines, departments will strengthen their capacity to respond to the needs of parliamentarians and other interested Canadians for adequate performance information.

## Conclusion

**3.56** This chapter provides our third annual assessment of departments' progress in implementing the first round of sustainable development strategies. Our objective in conducting our monitoring work was to determine whether the performance information that departments provide is adequate to permit members of Parliament and Canadians to know whether the departments' strategies are on track. In so doing, we also assembled and reviewed summary-level information on the progress reported by departments.

**3.57** As we found in the previous two years, the adequacy of information that departments provide in their progress reports varies widely. More departments than in previous years are following the Treasury Board Secretariat's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports*. However, the performance information provided by most departments on the progress of their sustainable development strategies continues to fall well short of requirements. In our opinion, lack of compliance with the Guidelines' concepts hampers Parliament's ability to hold departments to account for their progress toward sustainable development.

## About the Audit

### Objectives

A key duty of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development is to monitor the progress of departments in implementing their action plans and achieving their objectives for sustainable development. The Commissioner reports on progress in this chapter and other chapters of the report. The long-term goal of this work is to promote accountability through effective reporting and oversight of departmental performance in the management of environmental and sustainable development issues.

The objective of our audit was to determine whether the performance information that departments provide is adequate for members of Parliament and Canadians to know whether the departments' sustainable development strategies are on track. In the course of this work, we assembled and reviewed summary-level information on the progress reported by departments.

### Scope and approach

We examined the departmental performance reports of the 28 departments and agencies that we monitor and that had tabled sustainable development strategies in December 1997. Our objective was to assess their progress on reporting against the action plans and commitments set out in their strategies in accordance with the Treasury Board Secretariat *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports*.

For all 28 organizations, we reviewed the sustainable development content of the performance reports tabled in Parliament and the supplementary documents that were referenced therein. To facilitate our examination, we developed a database containing all of the commitments made by each department in its strategy. We used the database to compare the information reported by the 28 departments in their progress reports with the goals, objectives, targets, and actions contained in their sustainable development strategies. We did not audit departments' accomplishments to verify the accuracy of reported results; this will be the subject of future work.

Taking at face value the information contained in the departmental performance reports and supplementary progress reports referenced therein, we audited the extent to which departments provided the performance information specified in the Treasury Board Secretariat's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Departmental Performance Reports*.

### Audit team

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