

Accounting Research BULLETINS

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American Institute of Accountants
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Depreciation and High Costs

The Committee on accounting procedure recently authorized the issuance of a statement to members of the Institute dealing with the propriety of charging to current income (a) amounts in excess of depreciation based on cost of plant facilities to provide for their replacement at higher prices, and (b) a portion of the cost of currently acquired new facilities representing part or all of the excess of current construction costs over an estimated "reasonable" cost. The committee now deems it appropriate to issue that statement as a research bulletin. The statement of the committee follows:

1. "The American Institute of Accountants committee on accounting procedure has given extensive consideration to the problem of making adequate provision for the replacement of plant facilities in view of recent sharp increases in the price level. The problem requires consideration of charges against current income for depreciation of facilities acquired at lower price levels.

2. "The committee recognizes that business management has the responsibility of providing for replacement of plant and machinery. It also recognizes that, in reporting profits today, the cost of material and labor is reflected in terms of 'inflated' dollars while the cost of productive facilities in which capital was invested at a lower price level is reflected in terms of dollars whose purchasing power was much greater. There is no doubt that in considering depreciation in connection with product costs, prices, and business policies, management must take into consideration the probability that plant and machinery will have to be replaced at costs much greater than those of the facilities now in use.

3. "When there are gross discrepancies between the cost and current values of productive facilities, the committee believes that it is entirely proper for management to make annual appropriations of net income or surplus in contemplation of replacement of such facilities at higher price levels.

4. "It has been suggested in some quarters that the problem be met by increasing depreciation charges against current income. The committee does not believe that this is a satisfactory solution at this time. It believes that accounting and financial reporting for general use will best serve their purposes by adhering to the generally accepted concept of depreciation on cost, at least until the dollar is stabilized at some level. An attempt to recognize current prices in providing depreciation, to be consistent, would require the serious step of formally recording appraised current values for all properties, and continuous and consistent depreciation charges based on the new values. Without such formal steps, there would be no objective standard by

which to judge the propriety of the amounts of depreciation charges against current income, and the significance of recorded amounts of profit might be seriously impaired.

5. "It would not increase the usefulness of reported corporate income figures if some companies charged depreciation on appraised values while others adhered to cost. The committee believes, therefore, that consideration of radical changes in accepted accounting procedure should not be undertaken, at least until a stable price level would make it practicable for business as a whole to make the change at the same time."

6. "The committee disapproves immediate write-downs of plant cost by charges against current income in amounts believed to represent excessive or abnormal costs occasioned by current price levels. However, the committee calls attention to the fact that plants expected to have less than normal useful life can properly be depreciated on a systematic basis related to economic usefulness."

The statement entitled "Depreciation and High Costs" was adopted by the assenting votes of twenty members of the committee, of whom one, Mr. Wellington, assented with qualification. Mr. Paton did not vote.

Mr. Wellington assents to the bulletin but does not approve the statement that changes in accounting and financial reporting should be postponed until the dollar is stabilized at some level. He believes that the depreciation of the dollar is already so great as to call for recognition thereof in the accounts expressed in dollars. In his opinion the price level is rarely believed to be stable, and waiting for stability may again and again be advanced as a reason for no recognition of changes that have already taken place.

NOTES

1. *Accounting Research Bulletins represent the considered opinion of at least two-thirds of the members of the committee on accounting procedure, reached on a formal vote after examination of the subject matter by the committee and the research department. Except in cases in which formal adoption by the Institute membership has been asked and secured, the authority of the bulletins rests upon the general acceptability of opinions so reached. (See Report of Committee on Accounting Procedure to Council, dated September 18, 1939.)*

2. *Recommendations of the committee are not intended to be retroactive, nor applicable to immaterial items. (See Bulletin No. 1, page 3.)*

3. *It is recognized also that any general rules may be subject to exception; it is felt, however, that the burden of justifying departure from accepted procedures must be assumed by those who adopt other treatment. (See Bulletin No. 1, page 3.)*

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