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Managing a Better Environment: Opportunities and Obstacles for ISO 14001 in Public Policy and Commerce

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Review: Managing a Better Environment: Opportunities and Obstacles for ISO 14001 in Public Policy and Commerce

By J. Morrison, K. K. Cushing, Z. Day, and J. Speir

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J. Morrison, K. K. Cushing, Z. Day, & J. Speir. *Managing a Better Environment: Opportunities and Obstacles for ISO 14001 in Public Policy and Commerce*. Oakland, CA: The Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security, 2000. 133 pp.

This book fails to meet any normal standards of good writing. Essentially, the authors appear to have set out to write a book with no clear concept of the intended readership. It commonly has sentences of between 40 and 50 words. It suffers from an epidemic of acronyms with no glossary to assist the reader in interpreting them. It assumes a considerable prior knowledge of International Standards on the part of the reader. At the same time it has a detail-packed account of the trivia that surrounds the genesis and development of ISO 14001 and other peripheral topics. This in turn detracts attention from the stated objectives of the volume as expressed in the title. The result is a great deal of obscurity.

However, it deals with a topic of current importance to those responsible for environmental policy and practices. The shift from governmental control over public policy and commercial action to a hoped-for, but so far poorly enunciated, concept of self-regulation demands ongoing critical review and assessment. At present, the outlook is indeed uncertain. The authors on one hand extol the virtues of the ISO approach (but with little supporting evidence), yet admit that there are immense barriers that commonly make it unworkable. Lack of expertise and information, under-resourcing, lack of managerial and administrative infrastructure, cumbersome and often unaffordable procedures and the resulting lack of credibility combine to undermine its effectiveness.

There seems to be a built-in conflict between two views of the role of international standards. One is that ISO compliance (and certification) will perhaps serve to enhance performance, but more particularly the image, of a company and so make it more competitive. Within this ethos, all too few seem even to consider the possibility of operational strategies based in co-operation and collaboration. The other view is that the standard can provide a potent set of guidelines for improving performance-a framework that can more readily escape the stainless steel cage of competition and may indeed prove more effective. But this inherent contradiction is described without

any real sense of movement towards a resolution.

So, important as it should be, this book undermines much of my previous optimism, even if it was constrained, for the 14000 series of standards. The authors make relatively extravagant claims for its efficacy without any real evaluation or evidence and while citing a plethora of apparent shortcomings. Perhaps this reader is simply not part of the target audience to which the authors addressed themselves-but who is?

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