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Long-term construction-type contracts; Accounting Research Bulletin, no. 45

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Accounting Research BULLETINS

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Issued by the
Committee on Accounting Procedure
American Institute of
Certified Public Accountants
270 Madison Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

October, 1955

No. 45

Long-term Construction-type Contracts

1. This bulletin is directed to the accounting problems in relation to construction-type contracts in the case of commercial organizations engaged wholly or partly in the contracting business. It does not deal with cost-plus-fixed-fee contracts, which are discussed in Chapter 11, Section A, of Accounting Research Bulletin No. 43*, other types of cost-plus-fee contracts, or contracts such as those for products or services customarily billed as shipped or rendered. In general the type of contract here under consideration is for construction of a specific project. While such contracts are generally carried on at the job site, the bulletin would also be applicable in appropriate cases to the manufacturing or building of special items on a contract basis in a contractor's own plant. The problems in accounting for construction-type contracts arise particularly in connection with long-term contracts as compared with those requiring relatively short periods for completion.

2. Considerations other than those acceptable as a basis for the recognition of income frequently enter into the determination of the

**Restatement and Revision of Accounting Research Bulletins*, American Institute of Accountants, 1953.

timing and amounts of interim billings on construction-type contracts. For this reason, income to be recognized on such contracts at the various stages of performance ordinarily should not be measured by interim billings.

GENERALLY ACCEPTED METHODS

3. Two accounting methods commonly followed by contractors are the percentage-of-completion method and the completed-contract method.

Percentage-of-completion Method

4. The percentage-of-completion method recognizes income as work on a contract progresses. The committee recommends that the recognized income be that percentage of estimated total income, either:

- (a) that incurred costs to date bear to estimated total costs after giving effect to estimates of costs to complete based upon most recent information, or
- (b) that may be indicated by such other measure of progress toward completion as may be appropriate having due regard to work performed.

Costs as here used might exclude, especially during the early stages of a contract, all or a portion of the cost of such items as materials and subcontracts if it appears that such an exclusion would result in a more meaningful periodic allocation of income.

5. Under this method current assets may include costs and recognized income not yet billed, with respect to certain contracts; and

liabilities, in most cases current liabilities, may include billings in excess of costs and recognized income with respect to other contracts.

6. When the current estimate of total contract costs indicates a loss, in most circumstances provision should be made for the loss on the entire contract. If there is a close relationship between profitable and unprofitable contracts, such as in the case of contracts which are parts of the same project, the group may be treated as a unit in determining the necessity for a provision for loss.

7. The principal advantages of the percentage-of-completion method are periodic recognition of income currently rather than irregularly as contracts are completed, and the reflection of the status of the uncompleted contracts provided through the current estimates of costs to complete or of progress toward completion.

8. The principal disadvantage of the percentage-of-completion method is that it is necessarily dependent upon estimates of ultimate costs and consequently of currently accruing income, which are subject to the uncertainties frequently inherent in long-term contracts.

Completed-contract Method

9. The completed-contract method recognizes income only when the contract is completed, or substantially so. Accordingly, costs of contracts in process and current billings are accumulated but there are no interim charges or credits to income other than provisions for losses. A contract may be regarded as substantially completed if remaining costs are not significant in amount.

10. When the completed-contract method is used, it may be appropriate to allocate general and administrative expenses to contract

costs rather than to periodic income. This may result in a better matching of costs and revenues than would result from treating such expenses as period costs, particularly in years when no contracts were completed. It is not so important, however, when the contractor is engaged in numerous projects and in such circumstances it may be preferable to charge those expenses as incurred to periodic income. In any case there should be no excessive deferring of overhead costs, such as might occur if total overhead were assigned to abnormally few or abnormally small contracts in process.

11. Although the completed-contract method does not permit the recording of any income prior to completion, provision should be made for expected losses in accordance with the well established practice of making provision for foreseeable losses. If there is a close relationship between profitable and unprofitable contracts, such as in the case of contracts which are parts of the same project, the group may be treated as a unit in determining the necessity for a provision for losses.

12. When the completed-contract method is used, an excess of accumulated costs over related billings should be shown in the balance sheet as a current asset, and an excess of accumulated billings over related costs should be shown among the liabilities, in most cases as a current liability. If costs exceed billings on some contracts, and billings exceed costs on others, the contracts should ordinarily be segregated so that the figures on the asset side include only those contracts on which costs exceed billings, and those on the liability side include only those on which billings exceed costs. It is suggested that the asset item be described as "costs of uncompleted contracts in excess of related billings" rather than as "inventory" or "work in process," and that the item on the liability side be described as "billings on uncompleted contracts in excess of related costs."

13. The principal advantage of the completed-contract method is that it is based on results as finally determined, rather than on estimates for unperformed work which may involve unforeseen costs and possible losses.

14. The principal disadvantage of the completed-contract method is that it does not reflect current performance when the period of any contract extends into more than one accounting period and under such circumstances it may result in irregular recognition of income.

Selection of Method

15. The committee believes that in general when estimates of costs to complete and extent of progress toward completion of long-term contracts are reasonably dependable, the percentage-of-completion method is preferable. When lack of dependable estimates or inherent hazards cause forecasts to be doubtful, the completed-contract method is preferable. Disclosure of the method followed should be made.

COMMITMENTS

16. In special cases disclosures of extraordinary commitments may be required, but generally commitments to complete contracts in process are in the ordinary course of a contractor's business and are not required to be disclosed in a statement of financial position. They partake of the nature of a contractor's business, and generally do not represent a prospective drain on his cash resources since they will be financed by current billings.

The statement entitled "Long-term Construction-type Contracts" was adopted unanimously by the twenty-one members of the committee, of whom two, Mr. Coleman and Mr. Dixon, assented with qualification.

Mr. Coleman and Mr. Dixon do not approve the statements in paragraphs 6 and 11 as to provisions for expected losses on contracts. They believe that such provisions should be made in the form of footnote disclosure or as a reservation of retained earnings, rather than by a charge against revenues of the current period.

Mr. Coleman also questions the usefulness of the refinement of segregating the offset costs and billings by character of excess as set forth in the second sentence of paragraph 12. He suggests that a more useful alternative would be to show in any event total costs and total billings on all uncompleted contracts (a) with the excess shown either as a current asset or a current liability, and (b) with a supporting schedule indicating individual contract costs, billings, and explanatory comment.

NOTES

(See Introduction to Accounting Research Bulletin No. 43.)

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.

2. Opinions of the committee are not intended to be retroactive unless they contain a statement of such intention. They should not be

considered applicable to the accounting for transactions arising prior to the publication of the opinions. However, the committee does not wish to discourage the revision of past accounts in an individual case if the accountant thinks it desirable in the circumstances. Opinions of the committee should be considered as applicable only to items which are material and significant in the relative circumstances.

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. Except where there is a specific statement of a different intent by the committee, its opinions and recommendations are directed primarily to business enterprises organized for profit.

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