Depreciation Systems

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amount of plant in service are inputs to the system, and the accumulated provision for depreciation is a measure of the state of the system at any time. The process of calculating the accumulated provision for depreciation is determined by the factors needed to define the system. The initial input to the system is estimates of the life and salvage, which are combined in an accrual rate. Dynamic forces affect the life and salvage, and revision of the original life and salvage estimates are the result of the monitoring process. These revisions to the initial input initiate feedback in the form of adjustments to the accumulated provision for depreciation. The goal of the system is recovery of capital in a timely manner.

One consideration that complicates this discussion is that many options can be combined to form many different depreciation systems. Whether the depreciation is for book, tax, valuation, or other purposes, each of these factors must be considered when discussing and defining a depreciation system.

DEFINING A DEPRECIATION SYSTEM

Below is a list of the factors needed to define a depreciation system. Each factor contains two or three options, and the complete definition of a system requires the selection of one option from each factor. The order of the list is arbitrary, but the last four factors are those whose options are varied when discussing depreciation systems commonly used to calculate book depreciation.

1. The depreciation concept, including (a) physical condition, (b) decrease in value, or (c) cost of operation
2. Depreciation over (a) time or (b) units of production
3. Depreciation of (a) a unit of property or (b) a group of property
4. Methods of allocation, including (a) the straight line method, (b) an accelerated method, or (c) a decelerated method
5. Procedures for applying the method of allocation including (a) the average life procedure, (b) the equal life group procedure, or (c) the probable life procedure
6. Adjustment using (a) the amortization method or (b) the remaining life method
7. Use of (a) the broad group model or (b) the vintage group model

The mathematically astute reader who multiplies the number of options in each factor will find that there are 432 combinations of options, each of which is a potential depreciation system. However, not all of these combinations are feasible, and some are unimportant. Only a few of these

combinations are of major interest when considering systems of book depreciation currently being used.

Concepts of Depreciation

Three options are available when defining the concept of depreciation. These include (a) physical condition, (b) decrease in value, or (c) cost of operation. Though all have been used by utilities to determine book value, the cost of operation is, with few exceptions, the concept in current use.

Physical condition is, perhaps, the first option a lay person would think of if asked to define depreciation. An early reference to the relationship between depreciation and physical condition is from the 1588 textbook by John Mellis who referred to a debit to the profit and loss account because "implements of householde I doe find at this day to be consumed and worn." A later reference is in the 1833 annual report of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which reported that an annuity was established "to provide for the replacement of oak sills and sleepers and yellow pine stringpieces."

Two problems arise when using the concept of physical condition as a measure of depreciation. First, wear and tear do not account for all retirements; in fact, they are often a minor reason for the retirement of property. Second, physical condition can be difficult to measure. Though it is possible to measure directly the wear of railroad track and the corrosion of cast iron pipe, easily measurable wear is not characteristic of most industrial property.

The concept of loss of value is also a common depreciation concept, and the lay person often uses it to explain the difference between the purchase price and the current market value of an automobile or major household appliance. The definition from the Supreme Court case *Lindheimer v. Illinois Bell Telephone* (1934) is often quoted: "Broadly speaking, depreciation is the loss, not restored by current maintenance, which is due to all the factors causing the ultimate retirement of the property. These factors embrace wear and tear, decay, inadequacy, and obsolescence."

In contrast to the concept of physical depreciation, the Lindheimer definition recognizes that factors other than wear and tear cause or contribute to the retirement of property. The definition refers to the "loss" but does not clearly state what is "lost" or how the "loss" should be measured. A 1935 definition by the Federal Communications Commission was similar to the Lindheimer definition but referred to "loss in service value," where service value is equated to the original cost less salvage.

Use of the concept of loss of value to determine annual depreciation charges might imply the need for an annual valuation of the property owned by the organization, particularly if the rate of loss in value was not

uniform or readily defined. The process of determining a value is complex, depending on the purpose of the valuation and type of property. Thus, an annual valuation of a utility could be such an expensive and time-consuming process that it would not be a practical approach to use in determining annual depreciation.

Many types of property provide a constant level of service until they are retired. The intrinsic physical value of this type of property is only that it functions. A gas meter is a common example of a type of property that may provide a constant level of service throughout its life. If value is measured by the level of service provided, the meter would retain full value until retirement because its value to the utility would depend on its function rather than its age. This concept ignores the consumption of future service and would result in an annual depreciation charge that would be zero until the final year of service. Then the charge would equal the full value and would result in deferring all depreciation charges until the final year of service. A concept that better matches depreciation to service rendered and weighs it in relation to the total service potential might be preferable for purposes of both book and valuation depreciation. That is, a quantitative measure of value, such as service-years, is generally preferable to a functional measure.

The third concept is that depreciation represents an allocated cost of capital to operation. This concept recognizes that depreciation is a cost of providing service and that an organization should recover the capital invested in equipment and other property needed to provide the required service. In fact, the term *capital recovery* is often used in connection with depreciation. An early reference to depreciation is by the Roman Marcus Vitrurius Pollio, who in 27 B.C. wrote of "walls which are built of soft and smooth-looking stone, that will not last long." He calculated that the walls would not last more than eighty years and suggested that, for purposes of valuation, one-eightieth part of their original cost be deducted each year. Pollio not only raised several issues concerning depreciation but seemed to be equating depreciation to a cost of operation.

The definition of *depreciation accounting* by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (1961, par. 56) reflects the concept of depreciation as a cost: "Depreciation accounting is a system of accounting that aims to distribute cost or other basic value of tangible capital assets, less salvage (if any), over the estimated useful life of the unit (which may be a group of assets) in a systematic and rational manner. It is a process of allocation, not of valuation." This definition does not use the term *loss of service value* because it is defining depreciation accounting rather than depreciation itself. The definition emphasizes that the purpose of depreciation accounting is a means of distributing cost in a rational manner during the service life, in turn providing for the systematic recovery of capital. By use of the term *useful life,* the definition encompasses all causes of retirement. By referring to the distribution of cost less salvage, this definition recognizes that salvage should be considered when developing depreciation charges.

Historically, all three concepts of depreciation have been used by utilities to determine the book value of industrial property. Of these, the concept of depreciation as the allocation of cost has proven to be the most useful and most widely used concept.

Time versus Unit of Production

Useful life can be measured in units of time or units of production (also called units of service). Measurement of life in years is a common and familiar concept. Measurement of life in units of production can be applied to some types of property such as a truck, whose life can be measured in miles (e.g., a useful life of 100,000 miles). A feeder pipeline connecting an oil field to a transmission line will be in service until the field is no longer productive. If the only function of the feeder line is to transport oil from the field to the transmission line, the life of the feeder line is determined by the reserves of the oil field that must eventually pass through the pipeline. Annual depreciation could be measured in units of production, such as barrels of oil. A railroad might depreciate rail as a function of the accumulated weight that the rail has carried.

Suppose a truck is to be depreciated over its life as measured in miles. First, the life must be estimated, say 100,000 miles. Second, the number of miles the truck will be driven during the next year, say 27,000 miles, must be forecast to have sufficient information to budget the annual depreciation charge. Third, at the end of the year when the budgeted annual depreciation becomes an accounting entry, the amount would be calculated to reflect the actual miles driven.

The most common measure of life is in units of time rather than units of production. Most types of property (e.g., poles, buildings, wire) do not have a measure of production associated with them. If the life can be measured in some unit of production and the rate of production is constant from year to year, measurement of life in either units of time or production will result in the same annual accruals. The unit of production has strong appeal in situations where use varies significantly over time and the life can be measured in units of production. But these two conditions are not often met, and usually life is measured over time.

Depreciation of an Individual Unit versus a Group

Accounting records of transactions relating to depreciable property can be kept on either a unit or a group basis. An individual unit of property has a single life, while the units in a group of property display a range, or