Getting the Word Out at ERS

Editor's note: The enormous advance in the technology of information management has influenced the research community and how it goes about its jobs. If the technical changes in data handling are to be matched by organizational and institutional changes, regular reassessment of both needs and capabilities must be made. Problems of access, disclosure, respondent relations, and quality evaluation represent legitimate concerns of the research community. Economics is no exception. As an illustration of both concerns and proposed solutions, the Journal asked Ed Reinsel to report on the Economic Research Service's policy on dissemination of statistics, and Jim Horsfield to report on the Agency's Data Products Program.

The ERS Data Products Program

James Horsfield

Section 1121 of the Food Security Act of 1985 is particularly important to researchers and analysts interested in agriculture and rural affairs. It authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to furnish electronic materials prepared in the Department, to charge reasonable fees for them, and to use the fees collected to offset the costs of providing the materials. Before enactment of this provision, electronic data dissemination in the Department was governed by the User Fee Statute, which permits the collection of user fees established by regulation but specifically disallows agency use of the fees to offset costs. Thus, the 1985 Act reversed the Department's incentives to prepare and distribute electronic materials; it permits agencies to recover costs and removes the requirement for a regulatory process to establish fees.

The Economic Research Service was one of the first USDA agencies to begin an electronic data dissemination program based on Section 1121. ERS Administrator John Lee established the Standard Data Products Program in May 1986. This program provides copies of ERS data bases and data files for sale to the public. These products are data bases with a substantial ERS value-added component and are of a one-time nature without periodic updates. Accordingly, the program does not provide a subscription service for monthly or quarterly copies of current data. Products on personal computer diskettes and conventional magnetic tapes are available but each product is offered in only one medium. User fees for fiscal year 1990 are $130 for tape products and $25 and up for diskette products, depending on the number of the disks.

Eighteen data products were offered in the first year of the program, including data bases on such diverse topics as farm income, dry beans, rural fire protection, and fertilizer use. The current catalog lists 71 titles representing all ERS programs. Many of these products give users the electronic equivalent of published data such as the ERS situation and outlook yearbooks. Other products supplement and extend published data or provide access to unpublished data not otherwise available to non-ERS users.

The agency first expected use primarily by researchers and agribusiness analysts. Data product users, however, are not so easily classified. Orders come from a wide variety of users from around the world—farmers, consumers, interest groups, State and local government agencies, and businesses. These orders are processed by the ERS-NASS order desk, which offers a toll-free number for telephone orders and a variety of payment methods including several national charge cards.

ERS extended the services of the data products program to the American Agricultural Economics Association and the Rural Sociological Society in 1988 as a cooperative data sharing program. This program accepts data products from members of the two groups and advertises them in a special section of the ERS Electronic Products Catalog. Because user fees cover all program costs, the program furnishes a timely and cost-effective mechanism for sharing data.

Policy on Dissemination of Statistical Information

Edward I. Reinsel

ERS provides economic and social science information and analysis for improving the performance of the agricultural economy and rural America. In support of that mission the ERS policy is to:

1. Maximize the economic value of research and analysis.
2. Minimize the interaction of research and analysis with the political process.
3. Maximize the dissemination of the research and analysis to those who need it.

Copies of the ERS Electronic Products Catalog are available free from the ERS-NASS order desk at 1-800-999-6779.

3. Operated jointly with the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)
availability of data and information and encourage its broader use, (2) minimize restrictions on release of information, (3) strengthen the quality of statistical data, and (4) insure against any breach of confidentiality.

The policy applies to all summary and micro data under ERS control. It applies to all data derived from Federal surveys or administrative records as well as data obtained from State agencies, universities, foreign governments, international organizations, and other domestic or foreign sources. Under the policy, data purchased in summarized form are immediately available to all ERS users. After 6 months, with approval of the agency providing the summaries, the data will be available for more general distribution. Data received by ERS on individual farms that cannot be released because of confidentiality are first summarized, then made available to ERS staff and published for more general use.

Certain restricted or classified information is not disseminated, such as information bearing on national security and data that could reveal proprietary information about an individual respondent, farm, or firm. All written or oral statements to survey respondents, or conditions listed on administrative forms from which data may be taken or summarized are honored.

ERS-published statistics must have clearly defined and documented definitions available to users. As new definitions or changes are adopted, ERS explains them. ERS furnishes background information on survey and other data collection procedures, fully describes the content of data and tabulations, and evaluates the reliability and usefulness of the data. Such explanations, descriptions, and evaluations may be published separately or along with the data. The objective is to maximize the usefulness of ERS data and to minimize the likelihood that they will be misunderstood or misused.

Estimates are not published from sample surveys unless sufficient reports are received to provide statistically valid results which are clearly free of disclosure of information about individual respondents. This means that at least three observations must be available, although more observations may be necessary in some cases. ERS supplies as much information as possible on nonsampling errors, response rates, and bias. ERS publication of estimates based on probability surveys is accompanied by statistical measures of variation. When data series are built up from several sources, characteristics of the underlying data, including any measures of statistical precision, are described.

ERS publishes information about revisions to strengthen confidence in published estimates and data series. ERS identifies procedural changes, improved or more recent data, and any correction of errors that result in significant revisions (those that have the potential of changing the way a given situation is viewed or which could result in substantial changes in dollar values or in human impacts) to make the procedures as clear as possible.

Standard electronic data products are prepared and released with statistical bulletins, situation and outlook yearbooks, and other publications that include considerable data in tabular form. Published tables may not include all of the data available in standard data products. ERS does not reproduce data which are more directly available from other organizations on tapes, diskettes, or similar forms. Requests for such data are referred to the originating organization.

ERS publications typically follow statistical classifications and definitions adopted by the Office of Management and Budget and USDA. To the extent feasible, ERS uses the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) in publishing establishment data by industry type. When publishing business size statistics by revenue or assets, ERS uses the dollar size categories adopted by OMB to the extent that data are available. Exceptions to this general policy are made only when the exception will provide analytical insights that might otherwise be precluded by adherence to established classifications and definitions.

### Statistical Series Handbook

In cooperation with other USDA agencies, ERS is completing a 12-volume handbook on the Department's statistical series (Agriculture Handbook No. 671, Major Statistical Series of the U.S. Department of Agriculture).

The handbook is designed to help government, university, private sector, and other users become better acquainted with concepts and data underlying the Department's statistics. The handbook should benefit new users of USDA statistics as well as readers already familiar with many of the data series. Data users should find the handbook valuable in improving their knowledge of what the various data series measure and how appropriate they may be for specific uses.
Individual volumes in the handbook are:

1. Agricultural Prices, Expenditures, Farm Employment, and Wages
2. Agricultural Production and Efficiency
3. Farm Income
4. Agricultural Marketing Costs and Charges
5. Consumption and Utilization of Agricultural Products
6. Land Values and Land Use
7. Crop and Livestock Estimates
8. Farmer Cooperatives
9. Market News
10. International Agricultural Statistics
11. The Balance Sheet
12. Costs of Production

To obtain copies (available May 1990) call

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