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U.S. Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service



Information Quality Guidelines

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The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued government-wide information quality guidelines under Section 515 of the Treasury and General Government Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2001. The OMB guidelines were prepared to ensure and maximize the quality, utility, objectivity, integrity, transparency, and reproducibility of information disseminated by federal agencies and OMB directed each federal agency to issue its own guidelines. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has now issued basic guidelines for all Department agencies, including NASS. Those guidelines are available at the USDA Web Site (http://www.ocio.usda.gov/irm/qi_guide/index.html). The guidelines presented here (highlighted in bold) describe specific procedures the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) employs, in keeping with the OMB and USDA guidelines, to ensure its information products quality. The accompanying text describes steps that NASS takes to conform to these guidelines.

NASS prepares and releases to the public a wide variety of statistical products which cover nearly every facet of U.S. agriculture--production and supplies of food and fiber, prices received and paid by farmers, farm labor and wages, farm income and finances, chemical use, and basic demographic data. NASS issues about 425 statistical reports from its Headquarters each year, its State Statistical Offices issue some 9,000 reports and news releases annually highlighting or expanding on information in the National reports, and the Agency conducts and releases the Census of Agriculture every 5 years. NASS reports and its available data bases are used for decision making by farmers, farm and commodity marketing organizations, providers of goods and services to farmers, agribusinesses, and government planners and policymakers as well as by researchers, the media, and the public interested in agriculture.

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Utility

Utility involves the usefulness and availability of information to its intended audience. To produce useful, policy-relevant information, agencies must stay informed of needs and develop new data, models, and information products where appropriate.

NASS keeps informed of information needs through active and ongoing contact with the user community and provides vehicles for user input. NASS keeps abreast of information needs through a variety of means, including data user meetings, advisory committees, attending industry meetings, and sponsoring outreach activities.

NASS statistical and other information products are reviewed to ensure they remain relevant and timely and address current needs. Even though most NASS reports consist of specific data series, improvements to reports and data bases are constantly being made in terms of additional data breakouts, improved coverage, and improved timeliness. Special reports or additional categories within existing reports are added to best summarize the constantly changing character of agriculture, within the budget available to the Agency.

NASS information dissemination makes products widely available and broadly accessible. All reports and data bases are available electronically from the NASS Web Site with most statistical reports available in multiple formats. Dates and release times of statistical reports are shown on the annual calendar available by November of each preceding year. Special publications are announced as far

ahead of time as possible through the NASS Web Site and press releases. Free electronic mail subscriptions are available through a cooperative arrangement with Cornell University, which also provides archival access to all reports issued since 1995. Timeliness is critically important for many NASS market sensitive reports. All reports are available on the Internet within minutes of release and agricultural news services also provide immediate release of those reports.

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Objectivity

Objectivity involves ensuring that information is accurate, reliable, and unbiased and that information products are presented in a clear, complete, and well-documented manner. Objectivity is achieved by using reliable data sources and sound analytical techniques, by using proven methods, and by carefully reviewing the content of all information products.

NASS surveys are based on well maintained sampling frames. Since agricultural operations are constantly changing due to new entrants, mergers, new operating arrangements, and operators leaving farming, NASS offices constantly work to maintain a list sampling frame which is as up-to-date, and with as much detailed data for efficient stratification, as possible. The list sampling frame is constructed from all available list sources as well as name and address changes collected during on-going survey activities. In addition, the Agency has developed an area sampling frame which can provide independent estimates for common produced commodities and which provides an annual measure of the incompleteness in the list sampling frame.

Reliable administrative data are utilized by NASS whenever possible. There are many agricultural administrative data sources such as imports and exports, livestock slaughter, sign-up for various farm programs, and market movement and price data. NASS, after validating the quality, uses administrative data in concert with previously collected data to minimize new collections, to re-examine preliminary estimates, and to combine with other data in improved statistical reports.

NASS surveys are conducted using methodologies consistent with generally accepted standards. NASS employs and documents professional standards and practices for all major survey activities, including sampling frame development, sample design, questionnaire design and pre-testing, data collection, analysis of sampling and coverage errors, nonresponse analysis, imputation of missing data, weighting, and variance estimation. NASS follows guidelines and policies set forth in the Paperwork Reduction Act and other regulations related to the conduct of government surveys.

NASS estimates and forecasts are prepared using statistically sound procedures. Most NASS statistical reports are created from repetitive surveys of farmers or censuses of specific segments of agribusiness production, storage, and processing. This continuity provides important information for reviewing and analyzing current survey results. Historic survey data allows Agency personnel to calculate multiple survey indications. Administrative data are combined with survey data in balance sheet analyses when appropriate. Mathematical statisticians create sophisticated models for forecasting end-of-season production from early-season indications and data relationships from past years.

Survey procedures and past forecast and estimation performance are documented in market sensitive publications. Based on input from data users who want a practical basis for evaluating current reports, NASS includes performance documentation in many crop and livestock reports. This normally includes information on sample sizes, methods of data collection, estimation procedures, revision policies, and reliability expressed in terms of average, maximum, and minimum percentage changes for the past 20 forecasts or estimates. In addition, a brief overview of all NASS estimating programs is found in [Guide to the Sample Survey and Census Programs of NASS](#) on the NASS Web Site.

All NASS publications are closely edited and proofread to ensure clarity and coherence. Most NASS information products present data tables with minimal narrative explanations which highlight and clarify the data relationships. Table formats are known ahead of time so data users and the media can quickly extract information of particular interest. All tables and text are carefully reviewed and proofed before publication.

NASS has a comprehensive errata policy to inform users when an error has been found and corrected. If an error is detected after release but before long run copies are printed, corrections will be made for the long run. If the long run mailing has been sent out, an errata sheet is issued with all subsequent publications disseminated and, where appropriate, the errata sent to those who received the initial mailing. The corrected version is posted on the NASS Web Site and errata notices are posted to inform repeat Site visitors. Corrected copies are sent to e-mail subscribers.

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Integrity

Integrity, as used in the OMB quality guidelines, refers to the security of information from unauthorized access or revision to ensure that the information is not compromised through corruption or falsification. NASS utilizes policies and practices to closely protect all data and information.

NASS employs rigorous controls in order to carry out sound security practices. NASS operates under strong confidentiality legislation which protects all data reported to the Agency and legislation which subjects employees to fines and/or prison sentences for violation of confidentiality provisions. All employees must annually re-certify to the regulations. All survey data and summaries are controlled on a strict need-to-know basis and secured when not in use. NASS data networks are firewall and application access controlled and closely audited by security specialists. NASS regularly commissions outside security reviews and corrects any vulnerabilities found in those reviews. Differing levels of physical security are employed, depending on the market sensitivity of particular reports. For the most market sensitive reports, a secured work area has been constructed and reports are finalized only after all outside communications have been disabled and an armed guard is posted to prevent anyone from leaving the area and to admit only authorized personnel.

NASS has programs and policies in place for securing its resources as required by the Government Information Security Reform Act (P.L. 106-398, title X, subtitle G). Those procedures address all major components of information security and apply to all NASS operating components. In addition, NASS is subject to statutory requirements to protect the sensitive information it gathers and maintains on individuals. Those requirements are contained in the following documents:

- Privacy Act of 1974
- Computer Security Act of 1987
- Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circulars A-123, A-127, and A-130
- Government Information Security Reform Act
- Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act (FMFIA) of 1982
- Title 7, Section 2276 of the U. S. Code

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Transparency and Reproducibility

For the purpose of these guidelines, transparency refers to a clear description of the methods, data sources, assumptions, outcomes, and related information that allows a data user to understand how an information product was designed and produced. Reproducibility of information refers to the ability, in principle, for a qualified individual to use the documented methods, assumptions, and data sources to achieve comparable findings.

NASS will make the methods used to produce information as transparent as possible. NASS internal guidelines call for clear documentation of data and methods used in producing estimates and forecasts such that it can operate a truly National program implemented in 46 State Statistical Offices. Implementation of those guidelines ensures the reproducibility of disseminated information.

NASS estimates and projections are not directly reproducible by the public because all underlying data sets are confidential. However, reproducibility can be evaluated through periodic reviews by outside panels of technical experts and through documentation of methods, assumptions, data sources, and related information.

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