

Forestry Commission Guidance on Access to Official Statistics before Publication

Introduction

This document provides guidance to Forestry Commission staff on the situations in which access to FC official statistics can be provided before publication, under the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and related documentation. It applies to all FC official statistics, but is particularly relevant to compendium publications like Forestry Statistics and country indicator publications.

This guidance only applies to statistics that are being published for the first time – this is addressed in more detail below. This guidance applies to statistics that do not disclose information about individual persons or businesses - there are more constraints on handling disclosive data, covered by guidance on confidentiality¹.

Types of access

The following types of access are possible before publication:

- a) access by those compiling the statistics and those assisting in preparing the official statistics publication;
- b) access for quality assurance, intended to improve the quality of the statistics or their interpretation in the publication;
- c) access for operational use of administrative or management data that will appear in the official statistics publication (“operational” use can be wide ranging – see below);
- d) pre-release access to statistics in their final form, to brief those who may need to respond to the publication.

Access is only allowable if it can be allocated to one of the above categories. So if draft statistics are copied to a committee or person, it must be to seek their assistance in quality assurance or for them to contribute to operational use; it must not just be for information. Statistics from survey sources cannot be used for “operational” purposes before publication.

Those who compile statistics, assist in preparing publications or provide quality assurance may be the same people as those who will use the statistics for policy or briefing purposes. In such cases, care must be taken to keep the subsequent use separate from the preparation of statistics, and not inadvertently use statistical information before publication, except when authorised under (c) or (d).

¹ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7zxf3b>

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Operational use of administrative or management data includes dealing with individual cases, allocating operational resources and other appropriate decision-making. It has been decided that the latter purpose includes access by those in government who need to monitor progress in-year on Public Service Agreement indicators, as they may need to contribute to decision-making. On similar grounds, access can be extended to those who may contribute to decision-making in response to in-year progress on forestry indicators that use operational or management data. Such access must be recorded in a central record that can be made publicly available on request. Further guidance is available from the National Statistician's Guidance: Use of Administrative or Management Information (August 2009)² and the Forestry Commission's Statement of Administrative Sources (March 2010)³.

Access to statistics in their final form under (d) is covered by the latest Official Statistics Orders of UK Government and devolved administrations, and by the Forestry Commission's Pre-Release Access Statement. UK Government only allows such access for a period of 24 hours before publication; the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales operate different arrangements that allow up to 5 days pre-release access.

Identities of all those receiving access under (b) or (d) must be published in the relevant Forestry Commission document: "Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics for Quality Assurance" or "Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics in Final Form"⁴.

Previous Publication

This guidance only applies to statistics that are being published for the first time. The restrictions do not apply to any figures that have already been published - in other official statistics publications, research reports, management information or external publications.

However caution must be exercised in quoting figures from these other sources (particularly management information) if it is known that they are about to appear in an official statistics publication, as this may be seen as pre-empting the statistics publication.

Published management information may be less visible than official statistics. If there is expected to be a regular ongoing need to use such data before they appear in an official statistics compendium publication, then consideration must be given to earlier publication of the management information as official statistics.

If a statistic has not been explicitly shown in an earlier publication, but can be derived from data already published, then current guidance is that the statistic is treated as having already been published, so access restrictions do not apply. Anyone could have derived the statistics from the published data, so there can't be any restrictions on access. However

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/guidance/index.html>

³ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-83mfrz>

⁴ Both available from <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-83mfrz>

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care must be exercised if the derived statistic is high profile and its use may be seen as promoting a different message from any contained in the original publication⁵.

If a statistic is derived from data used for an earlier publication, but cannot be derived from the data actually published, then it is considered to be a new statistic, to which access restrictions apply.

If there is expected to be a regular ongoing need for a derived statistic, either based on published data or based on underlying unpublished data, then consideration should be given to including it explicitly in the earlier publication.

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March 2010

⁵ The potential problems are in its use giving official endorsement to the contrary message. For example, consumer price indices are normally presented as changes over a 12-month period. If in late 2009, when inflation was reported as being very low, a government spokesperson had used the monthly index values to present the figures as a sharp fall in late 2008 followed by a steady rise though 2009, this could have altered inflationary expectations for early 2010.