The Evolution of the Official Australian Agricultural Statistics Collection System

Edward (Ted) Whybrow

Queensland Department of Primary Industries, Australia

ABSTRACT: Australia has traditionally relied upon central government statistical agencies to annually collect and tabulate basic agricultural statistics to shire and sub-shire levels. In recent years, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australia's core statistics authority) has reduced the amount of agricultural statistics it collects and disseminates due mainly to changing priorities within the Bureau. The resultant statistics will not be sufficient for the management of Australian agriculture. The responsibility for collecting these data may eventually rest with another organisation.

1. Introduction

The collection and dissemination of agricultural statistics have been the responsibility of government agencies since the early days of European settlement in Australia. Detailed activity data had been collected at least annually by the responsible authorities and the tabulated statistics had been made available at small area levels for general use by the public. In 1997, government funding of the main collection, the annual Agricultural Census, was cut by approximately 40 percent and users were advised that full data collection would only be reinstated with contributions from users.

2. The Early Years

After the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the establishment of colonies on Australia's east coast, officials from each colony compiled information for inclusion in reports to the Colonial Office in London. Although intended primarily for administrative purposes, these reports provided the basis from which later statistical publications were developed. With the advent of responsible Government for the colonies, these reports were succeeded by Statistical Registers which were published in all States. By the latter half of the 19th century, most Australian States were regularly collecting statistics from farmers.

3. Since Federation

There was little need for uniformity of statistics between States until the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution was adopted on Federation in 1901. Under the new Constitution, however, the Australian Government was given power to make laws in relation to "census and statistics" and in 1905, the Commonwealth Census and Statistics Act was passed. This legislation established the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics and set the scene for the future development of the collection of all official statistics, including agricultural statistics, in Australia.

Initially, the Bureau depended on the various State Statistical Offices to provide agricultural and other statistical data in a form which could be aggregated to Australian totals. Regular conferences of Commonwealth and State Statisticians provided the coordinating machinery needed to produce national level statistics until the early 1930s. As a consequence of the severe economic problems at that time, it became evident that tighter coordination and control was needed to produce reliable national statistics. However, it was not until 1949 that discussions took place between the Prime Minister and the State

Premiers with the objective of fully integrating the Commonwealth and State statistical services. This was finally achieved after the passing of the Statistics (Arrangements with the States) Act in 1956. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Act of 1975 established the present Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as a statutory body with the functions of a central statistical authority. The Australian Statistical Advisory Council, whose function it is to advise the Minister (responsible politician) and the Australian Statistician on matters relating to the wide range of statistical services which the ABS is required to provide, and the prioritisation of those services, was also established under the Act.

4. Recent Years

Following the integration of statistical services in 1956, ABS assumed sole responsibility for conducting an annual census of agricultural activity (i.e. area and production of crops, livestock numbers and disposals, etc). In the years after integration, the core items in the census remained virtually unchanged until the early 1990s. During this time, data relating to resource usage, risk management, conservation issues, etc. were collected from time to time and mainly paid for by organisations external to ABS.

Between the early 1970s and the mid 1990s, ABS instituted major changes to the scope of the census due mainly to budget constraints. As a consequence of these changes, the number of agricultural establishments covered by the census altered depending on the change of definition of scope. The extent to which the levels of activities changed depended on whether those activities were conducted in small or large agricultural establishments. These changes in scope are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Agricultural Census Changes in Scope

to 1972-73	Rural holdings one acre or more or where an intensive livestock activity is being undertaken
1973-74 to 1974-75	As per 1972-73 with “one acre” changed to “one hectare”
1975-76	Enterprises with estimated value of agricultural operations (EVAO) equal to or greater than $1,500 or of more than 10 hectares
1976-77 to 1980-81	Enterprises with EVAO equal to or greater than $1,500
1981-82	Enterprises with EVAO equal to or greater than $2,500
1982-83 to 1985-86	Establishments with EVAO equal to or greater than $2,500
1986-87 to 1990-91	Establishments with EVAO equal to or greater than $20,000
1991-92 to 1992-93	Establishments with EVAO equal to or greater than $22,500
1993-94 to present	Establishments with EVAO equal to or greater than $5,000

In addition to the changes in scope, a system of truncated censuses, which was to be implemented in two years out of three and included only major core items, was introduced in 1994-95. With a few minor exceptions, the items in the “truncated” questionnaire became the new core items from 1996-97 onwards. This was due to budget constraints, changed priorities within ABS and Federal Government requirements to reduce the reporting load on small businesses.

In their 1997 Budget, the Australian Government cut funding to ABS for the collection of agricultural statistics. A complete census will now be conducted every five years with a national survey in the intervening years. The main effect of this change will be that Shire level agricultural activity data will not be available in the survey years unless the funding which was withdrawn by the Australian Government can be obtained from State governments and industry bodies.

Given the suddenness of the cuts to agricultural statistics, a system has evolved which will no longer produce Shire level data required by State Governments and industry organisations for regional management, research and policy development. The time series of small area agricultural activity statistics will cease from 1997-98 in all Australian States except Queensland. Through the contribution of additional funds by the Queensland State Government, Shire data will be available for 1997-98 but they will then not be available until 2001-2002.

5. Other Collections

ABS compiles the *Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced* from data from the annual agricultural activity collection and other sources and publishes it twice a year. Gross value estimates (market place valuation) and local value estimates (farm gate valuation) are produced for all major commodities. Since 1986-97, ABS has conducted an annual *Agricultural Finance Survey* which provides estimates of income, operating and capital expenditure, and indebtedness directly attributable to the rural sector. These data are available annually at the State level. Data on livestock slaughterings and wool receivals by brokers and dealers are presently collected and published monthly. As from September 1998, statistics tabulated from these data will be published quarterly. A number of other minor collections of rural and near rural information are also undertaken by ABS.

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) conducts surveys and publishes estimates relating to the financial performance of Australian broadacre grazing and farming activities and the dairy industry.

6. The Future

ABS's role is to collect, tabulate and disseminate a broad range of statistics required by the Australian community. In recent years, it has suffered large budget cuts and has been required to fund 10 percent of its activities through the sale of statistics. The Bureau's priorities are very much set by the funds it has available, its prime responsibilities to national accounting and pressures to provide social and other data required by government and the general community.

Agriculture and other goods producing industries have suffered reduced priority within ABS in recent years. It is highly likely that ABS funding for the collection of agricultural data will continue to decline in the future. The resultant statistics will not be sufficient for the management of Australian agriculture, and industry is likely to look elsewhere for its data. Given the importance of agriculture to Australia's exports and agriculture's multiplier effect throughout the Australian economy, the collection of statistics to satisfy its requirements will, more than likely, come to rest within the responsibility of a central government organisation closely aligned with the agricultural sector.