

USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service Questions and Answers about Statistical Reporting Procedures

How does NASS ensure there is no early release of its crop and livestock reports?

NASS prepares reports under tight security and is committed to protecting these reports until they are publicly released at preannounced dates and times. All of our pre-release estimates and reports are protected by a comprehensive set of physical and electronic security measures. Particularly sensitive reports, like our in-season crop production forecasts, are prepared and released in a "Lockup" environment.

What is Lockup and why is it important?

Anyone having early access to sensitive information would have an obvious advantage in trading on the commodities market. Lockup ensures that no information is released early to anyone. Not even the Secretary of Agriculture knows a report's contents until he enters the Lockup area to sign the report just prior to release. Equal simultaneous public access to data for all is a hallmark of NASS reports.

The process begins when NASS field offices transmit encrypted estimates to headquarters. The encrypted data are secured, still in an encrypted form, until the Lockup area is physically secured. This means an officer is stationed at the single entry point, the doors are locked and alarmed, the windows are covered with shades that are secured with tamper resistant seals, and all telephone and Internet connections are switched off. Only authorized personnel are allowed to enter this area, and once someone enters they may not leave until the Lockup ends and the report is publically released. Everyone entering Lockup leaves cell phones and other wireless devices outside and signs an agreement to that effect. Additionally, the Lockup area is continually monitored for cell phone and wireless transmissions.

Why does NASS allow news reporters early access to reports under secure conditions?

The data NASS releases are made available to everyone at the same time so that no individual or organization has an unfair advantage. NASS publishes the release dates in advance on its Web site and in printed calendars.

NASS has the authority to give news agencies access to the embargoed reports in advance of the official release time so they can release their stories at the same time that NASS releases the reports. Members of the press may be allowed into a secured media facility within the Lockup area up to two hours prior to report release in order to prepare timely stories. They are unable to transmit their stories until the official release time, when NASS personnel restore phone and Internet connections.

Printed copies of reports are available to the public at release time, and commodity statisticians are then permitted to discuss the information. Reports are available on the Internet within seconds of the release.

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Which news services are given early access?

Currently, five news organizations have equipment installed in the Lockup media facility that allows them to release their stories from Lockup. These are DowJones, Thomson Reuters, Need to Know News, Bloomberg, and DTN. The reporters are sponsored by their respective agencies and credentialed by one of the Congressional press galleries after a review by a committee of peers. Any news organization credentialed by one of the Congressional press galleries can be allowed access to this facility provided space is available and the organization can provide its own equipment that meets NASS requirements.

How does NASS ensure that its employees keep information secure until the release date and time?

NASS employees work on approximately 500 published reports each year and security is a top priority at all times. Every NASS field office and headquarters unit employs strict security procedures when working on reports. Each employee, or person working in cooperation with NASS, signs a confidentiality form each year and is subject to termination of employment, fines, or imprisonment for disclosing confidential information.

Only NASS employees working on a specific report have access to the data, and work areas are limited to employees involved in the report process. Employees who do not have direct involvement with a specific report are prohibited from accessing the data until they are released to the public.

Whether employees are preparing weekly broiler numbers, monthly crop production forecasts, annual cattle inventories, or the 5-year Census of Agriculture results, security procedures ensure protection from premature disclosure of the data prior to the official release time.

How does NASS keep an individual's identifying information confidential?

Confidentiality of personal identifying information, as well as the security of data, are the highest priorities for NASS. Each employee takes this responsibility seriously. All information collected by NASS about individuals or operations under a pledge of confidentiality is protected by law. Every person working for or in cooperation with NASS – from the Agency Administrator to the person collecting the information – signs a confidentiality form which states that no confidential reported information will be compromised. This includes sworn agents who are authorized by NASS to provide data collection support or statistical research. Any offender is subject to a jail term (5 years), a fine (\$250,000), or both.

Are NASS statistics influenced by political leaders or agendas or market pressures?

No. NASS reports are not influenced by any pressures or politics. NASS reports are the official USDA estimates prepared under objective, nonpartisan, statistically sound procedures. The reports are reviewed internally and released with the final approval of the Agricultural Statistics Board. All members of the Board and the NASS Administrator are career civil servants.

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Prior to release of a report from Lockup, the Secretary of Agriculture or a designated representative signs the report. The Secretary is then briefed on the details in the report. However, the report is not changed as a result of this briefing.

Federal Statistical Directives # 3 and #4 are designed to preserve and enhance the objectivity and transparency, in fact and in perception, of the processes used to release and disseminate NASS statistics. These directives are USDA regulation; they ensure equitable, policy-neutral, and timely release of information to the general public.