

**UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

UNECE Work Session on the Communication and Dissemination of Statistics
(13-15 May 2009, Warsaw, Poland)

**United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service**

ABOUT US

Headquarters location:	Washington, DC, USA
Number of employees in your organization:	1,100
Number of staff working on communication and dissemination:	20

1. MANAGING COMMUNICATION AND CREDIBILITY

External communications and dissemination functions are managed by the Marketing and Information Services Office (MISO), under the Deputy Administrator for Programs and Products. Within MISO:

- The Marketing Section handles public affairs, media relations, and public requests for information.
- The Administrative Support Section handles the compilation and dissemination of all statistical reports.
- The Internet Support staff handles the electronic dissemination of information via the NASS Web site.

All statistical reports are released according to a pre-published schedule, ensuring equal access to the information. Major program changes are announced via the Federal Register of the United States. Minor program changes and other items of interest are posted to the agency Web site and emailed to subscriber lists. Press releases highlighting newsworthy information are posted to the Web and emailed to media contacts. Politically sensitive communications must be cleared by the agency administrator and the political leadership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but there is no political influence on the data NASS publishes.

When there is a crisis, NASS policy is to release information as quickly as possible and to maintain equal access to information. NASS has faced two crisis situations in the past year:

- After NASS collected the data for the annual Acreage report in June 2008, there was major flooding in the principal crop-producing areas of the Midwestern United States. To ensure that the report accurately reflected the situation, NASS re-interviewed 1,150 farmers in affected areas prior to the publication of the report on June 30, 2008.
- NASS had to re-release the October 10, 2008 Crop Production report on October 28 after discovering data discrepancies caused by problems with a database maintained by another USDA agency. This monthly report is market sensitive and is one of the principal economic indicators for the United States. The problems affected the acreage and production estimates for six crops.

Challenges / concerns:

- Maintaining confidentiality of data until release time to ensure equal access.
- Keeping political leadership in USDA informed, but keeping data free from political influence.

Lessons learned:

- From the Midwest floods, we learned that despite the costs involved it is important to be responsive to changing conditions. When circumstances warrant, it's worthwhile to supplement normal data collection activities in order to ensure that the data we publish is as timely and accurate as possible.

- Lack of information leads to speculation, so be forthright and communicate quickly and clearly when problems are discovered. From the October Crop Report situation, we learned that even though the media, data users and others are not happy about the changes in the numbers, they gave NASS and USDA credit for taking steps to rectify the situation as soon as the problem was discovered.

2. IMPROVING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: WORKING BETTER TOGETHER

NASS is a relatively small organization, so much of our internal communication is informal, with information shared via staff meetings at various levels, through email, and through management's open-door policies. Staff are grouped by function (e.g., sampling, questionnaire design, survey administration, statistical analysis, communications), but most work is done in cross-functional teams that meet on a regular basis. This helps keep staff aware of what's going on in other parts of the agency. Various managerial councils set directions and priorities for the teams.

Modes of internal communication include email, an electronic bulletin board/discussion board that's part of the email system, and an intranet system. Official memoranda and instructions issued by management are posted to the bulletin board and archived on the intranet.

Challenges/ concerns:

- Keeping people informed without overloading them.
- Distinguishing critical or time-sensitive communications from those that are more routine.
- Fostering two-way communication between top management and agency staff.
- Facilitating information sharing among headquarters staff and 46 field offices.

3. WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

In the last 5 years, NASS has hired trained public affairs specialists and no longer relies solely on statisticians to communicate with the media and the public. The public affairs/marketing team focuses on cultivating and maintaining relationships with members of the media, many of whom now contact us regularly for help with stories, fact checking, etc. The public affairs specialists are active in professional trade media organizations, including the American Agricultural Editors Association and the National Association of Farm Broadcasting.

Over the last few years, NASS has begun issuing news releases in conjunction with the release of major reports, highlighting key findings rather than making reporters pore through a lengthy report to find the story. This has significantly improved coverage of our reports and statistics, particularly by mainstream media. We've also created fact sheets, easy-to-read graphics and other user-friendly materials to help simplify the data.

Challenges / concerns:

- The media don't just want the numbers, they want the stories behind the numbers. But traditionally, NASS has been an agency that publishes data but leaves the commentary and analysis to economists and others.
- Our agency has no embargo system in place, meaning media get access to our data at the same time that the public does.

4. EDUCATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH HARD-TO-REACH RESPONDENTS

In promoting the 2007 Census of Agriculture, NASS's communications efforts focused on traditionally under-represented populations, including small, minority, non-English-speaking and limited-resource farmers and ranchers. We sought the cooperation and support of entities that already worked with and had

earned the trust of these individuals, including farming and ranching associations, businesses, and local community-based organizations.

We've also targeted media and communications efforts to the geographic areas and segments of agriculture where these individuals are most likely to be located. We've provided outreach materials in Spanish and Navajo and used a news release distribution service targeted to Spanish-language media.

Challenges / concerns:

- Establishing trust and credibility.
- Overcoming language barriers.
- Overcoming cultural barriers including mistrust of government and reluctance to share sensitive information.

5. TO CHARGE OR NOT TO CHARGE: FUNDRAISING, ACCESS LICENCES AND COSTING MODELS

All of the information NASS publishes is available to the public, at no cost, via the Internet. At the scheduled release time, all reports are loaded to the NASS Web side and made available for online access or downloading. Data users may also subscribe to receive the reports of their choice, free of charge, via e-mail.

Mail subscriptions to NASS's most-requested reports are handled via the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), which is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce. NTIS charges subscribers for the reports. NASS pays NTIS a fee to provide this service, but our agency does not receive any proceeds.

Challenges / concerns:

- The vast majority of our data is available online, but many people still prefer paper copies for reference, especially for the Census of Agriculture and other large, less frequent reports. We want to make all of our data as accessible as possible in all forms, but there are significant costs involved in printing and shipping larger volumes.

6. OTHER INFORMATION / ISSUES

We would welcome the opportunity to learn about other agencies' experience with:

- Use of new media and Web 2.0 communications.
- Quantifying the effectiveness of public relations and media outreach activities.
- Use of incentives to improve response rates.
- Pre-releasing data to the media under embargo conditions.

