Challenges and Solutions in Preparing the US Domestic Support Notifications

Anne Effland
Economic Research Service, USDA

Key Points from US Experience

- An organized and sustainable process is essential
- Complexity of process will reflect the complexity of policies, but principles remain the same:
  - dedicated resources
  - transparency of practices & good documentation
  - strategies to incorporate change

Outlines of the US Process

- Preparing US domestic support notifications is multi-agency data management and reporting process
  - layered process of data collection, calculation, reporting, and verification
  - assures careful application of WTO rules, accuracy of data & methods
  - multiple challenges of coordination, communication, documentation

Challenges

- Original schedule prepared following URAA, so data sources, software & methods identified in mid-1990s

- Since then, major changes in
  - data sourcing & handling
  - computing environment
  - farm policy

Data Sourcing: Challenges

- Data for notifications come from wide range of sources across USDA and other agencies

- In early years, frequently tied to individual contacts and special computer runs drawing on internal administrative databases

- Even with good documentation, access to these sources could be lost due to changing personnel and database design

Data Sourcing: Solutions

- Over time, priority became transitioning to electronic files and web sourcing
  - Initially tried creating automated database for internal data collection and reporting, with multiple access layers
  - soon focused instead on identifying public sources

Data Handling: Challenges

- Data reporting requires coordination within and across agencies throughout a lengthy process

- Presented some difficulty to manage updates, corrections, new data, and final reporting & verification without introducing additional errors

Data Handling: Solutions

- Over time, have developed technical processes to simplify and increase transparency in update, correction, and review
  - DS1 supporting tables recreated in spreadsheet form & interlinked for automated updating
  - Footnotes on data sources and methods and authorizing legislation continually updated

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Computing Environment: Challenges

- Hardware & software transitions from
  - central processing to PC, DOS to Windows, FTPs to web posting
  - QuatroPro and Lotus to Excel, Paradox to Access
  - printouts to 5 ¼ inch floppies to 3 ½ inch floppies to CDs to jump drives and remote access/shared drives

- With each change, access to records and methods used in previous computing environments becomes difficult

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Computing Environment: Solutions

- Increased stability of web-based reporting has reduced some of these hurdles to continuity, but best protection is simplicity and transparency

- Example—interest subsidy estimate for Marketing Assistance Loan Program
  - from complex programming tied to remote mainframe
  - to spreadsheet calculation using primarily publicly available web-based data

Policy Changes: Challenges

- Policy changes since 1994
  - new Farm Acts
  - disaster and emergency assistance
  - other commodity legislation—tobacco transition, crop insurance
  - related programs—nutrition, rural development, credit, trade, regulatory

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Policy Changes: Solutions

- Require many adjustments
  - new data sources
  - new & adapted methods
  - additions & adjustments to tables

- Example—Trade Adjustment Assistance Program
  - identified new data sources for both technical & financial assistance from public sources where possible
  - adapted methods & reporting tables for new commodities, varied accounting years, & lagged payments

Summary

- The core lessons that we have learned over the years:

    – SIMPLIFY DATA HANDLING PROCESSES

    – INCREASE TRANSPARENCY OF DATA & METHODS

- These principles produce double benefits:

    – A clear, sustainable reporting process

    – Improved public accessibility of notifications