

Dear Dr Byron,

Please find following a submission from the ABS to your inquiry 'Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies'. A hard copy will follow in the mail. If you would like to follow up on any matter my contact details are:

Jeannette Heycox
Assistant Director Environment and Energy Section
Australian Bureau of Statistics
PO box 10 Belconnen ACT 2616
ph 02 6252 7889
fax 02 6252 5335

Yours faithfully
Jeannette Heycox

Australian Bureau of Statistics submission to
Productivity Commission Inquiry
Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development by
Commonwealth Departments and Agencies

Background

This submission is in response to recommendation 7.4 of the Productivity Commission's Draft Report "Implementation of Ecologically Sustainable Development by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies", which states:
"Data collection relating to ESD issues should be rationalised to avoid duplication of effort and coverage. The ABS should be given the major responsibility for developing, in consultation with stakeholders, standard classifications and consistent measurement protocols for the collection of

state of the environment data and other sustainability indicators. The current work of the ABS in this area should be given a high priority."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) understands this recommendation to mean that the ABS undertake a more active coordination role and develop standards to underpin data activity in relation to environment and resource data. The recommendation as it stands has caused some confusion in that some have erroneously interpreted it as recommending that the ABS take major responsibility for State of the Environment Reporting. Also, it is not clear how an expanded role for the ABS would operate and how it would impact on related work already in existence. This submission attempts to set out what form an expanded role for the ABS could take and how that role might be progressed.

A previous submission to the inquiry by the ABS was provided in Nov 1998. That submission covered: ABS's legislative authority and role in providing information to support decision making; the role ABS has played to date in providing environment related information and compiling integrated environmental and economic statistics; the problems the ABS has experienced with environment and resource data availability, accessibility, consistency and quality; and ABS policy on utilising administrative data systems for statistical purposes.

ABS current position

An active role in data coordination is consistent with ABS legislative authority which charges the ABS to ensure co-ordination of the operations

of official bodies in the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics and related information, with particular regard to

(i) the avoidance of duplication in the collection by official bodies of information for statistical purposes;

(ii) the attainment of compatibility between, and the integration of, statistics compiled by official bodies; and

(iii) the maximum possible utilisation, for statistical purposes, of information, and means of collection of information, available to official bodies;

to formulate, and ensure compliance with, standards for the carrying out by official bodies of operations for statistical purposes;

ABS provides environment related information and compiles integrated environmental and economic statistics including environmental accounts. The role to date has included:

the collection and publication of new information from households and business,

the compilation of a range of information from both ABS and external sources into compendium type publications or as environmental accounts.

Environmental accounts show the stocks and flows of natural resources, value those stocks which provide an economic return and identifying the monetary flows within the economy related to environmental protection.

The problems the ABS has experienced when collating environment and

resource data are consistent with those identified in the draft report. We agree on the need for greater consistency in the use of statistical standards, classifications and measurement protocols.

The ABS has an active coordination role in economic and social statistics.

Within these fields our role can be described as taking three broad forms.

An expanded role in ESD data could operate in a similar way.

1. As a consultant, to advise on standard setting and support lead agencies developing standards, including advice on international standards.
2. Develop the standards for others to use. In particular, in fields where there is no clear lead agency or where stakeholders request ABS act as an independent agency to broker a solution between a range of stakeholders.
3. Take program responsibility for the development of the standards and the production/dissemination of public interest statistics and/or directories based on them.

In addition, the ABS provides input to the development and maintenance of international standards.

To more fully understand how these roles are fulfilled it is worthwhile looking at some examples.

Example of form 1 - Health Statistics

Coordination of health statistics are documented in the Procedures Manual

for the National Health Information Agreement. The work is coordinated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare under the authority of this intergovernmental agreement. The National Health Information Management Group (NHIMG) oversees the National Health Information Work Program including the development of data definitions. The latter function is performed through the National Health Data Committee. The ABS role is to support the development of these standards by the provision of expert input into their development and to encourage consistency of data elements, taking account of existing related standards and international practices. The success of ABS involvement depends on the quality of expert advice provided and ABS's recognised independence and integrity. The resource commitment from the ABS is less than one person per year.

Example of form 2 - Crime and Justice Statistics

One of the primary functions of the National Centre for Crime and Justice Statistics (NCCJS) is statistical co-ordination, particularly the establishment of frameworks and standards. In that regard it provides an example of form 2. However, NCCJS also has responsibility for surveys of crime victimisation. In relation to its coordination functions the NCCJS has responsibility for three user funded statistical units: the National Crime Statistics Unit, the National Criminal Courts Statistics Unit and the National Corrective Services Statistics Unit. Each of these Units has a separate work program, budget and management structure including a Board of Management and an Advisory Group. One of the principal challenges for the Centre is thus to ensure that the requirements of the individual user

communities represented by these Units are met within a broader framework which allows co-ordination of statistical information both across the justice system and with other areas of social and economic interest.

The development of a national framework for crime and justice statistics has the potential to yield substantial benefits in terms of the integration of statistical systems across the criminal justice environment and the development of high quality administrative by-product statistical systems. The development of crime and justice statistics needs to be planned on the basis of a thorough understanding of the key user requirements for information across all of the structural elements of the system (eg. police, prosecutions, courts administration, legal representation) and for all sub-populations within the system (eg. victims, juveniles, Indigenous persons). A conceptual framework can also highlight the connections between elements of the criminal justice system that may be obscured by the tendency for criminal justice agencies to operate within boundaries defined by their administrative responsibilities. Finally, the availability of a comprehensive, integrated set of data standards can feed into the system development activities of criminal justice agencies and provide a basis for national statistics to be collected in a manner that maximises their comparability and minimises provider load.

The quality assurance strategy adopted by the units within the NCCJS is focussed on improving the quality and comparability of the source administrative by-product data with State departments which maintain

responsibility and control over their own data. States release their own detailed State statistics. One of the main elements of this strategy is to influence the agencies in each jurisdiction to adopt the national standards and classifications developed by the ABS in consultation with the agencies.

Example of form 3 - Culture and Leisure Statistics

The National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics has responsibility for the coordination of national statistical activity in the fields of culture and recreation. It provides an integrated information system based on clearly defined frameworks and systems, and through these coordinates the statistical activities of the culture and leisure sector.

The Centre also provides a statistical compilation service and the development and conduct of new and existing collections. It is jointly funded by the ABS and a variety of key users with its work program developed in conjunction with two statistical working groups. Both working groups report to their ministerial council through a standing committee of Commonwealth, State and Territory department heads.

Features of ABS coordination

The cases highlighted above have resulted in statistics and information being more widely and equitably disseminated and greater utility being derived from the data collected. In each of the cases described above ABS independence has been important to the success of the venture, particularly where the history was one where there was mistrust within the group of

sources. The ABS was able to act as an independent broker and not as a representative of particular Commonwealth or State interests. The ABS was seen as being impartial and credible with an agenda of statistical excellence rather than a policy agenda, but with the capacity to meet the needs of information for policy issues. At times it was difficult juggling the different interests groups and dealing fairly with all interests involved. A high level of consultation with stakeholders and community involvement was needed. The ABS was able to steer the data custodians away from a narrow short term view and establish a sound statistical collection that met long term needs. The infrastructure provided by ABS State offices was instrumental in ensuring the establishment of sound relationships with, and support for, State agencies.

The systems built were done so with links to other relevant statistical systems, including the incorporation of international links. Best practice in data management and coordination activities were employed. Essential prerequisites for the success of the ventures were user and supplier support, including ministerial support, and the appropriate level of funding.

Concerns by stakeholders about an expanded role for the ABS

While many stakeholders would welcome a solution to the problems being experienced with Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD) data and appreciate ABS achievements to date, confidence in ABS ability to deliver is not uniformly accepted. The concerns expressed will need to be

addressed as part of the implementation of an expanded role. The concerns include:

ABS lacks the scientific expertise for a more involved role in some ESD fields.

The ABS is a traditional organisation that has been slow to move into new areas. Resource and environment information is a fast moving field.

The confidentiality provisions of the Census and Statistics Act may preclude the release of data which was previously accessible.

The ABS does not have much experience in working with existing spatial data standards. There is a need to improve spatial attributes in economic and social data.

Environment and resource data might be a marginal activity for the ABS as it has traditionally given priority to economic and social data.

ABS Response

The ABS doesn't accept the validity of all these concerns.

We agree that we don't have the required scientific knowledge for some ESD fields and we generally would not seek to get involved in these fields. We also agree that we have had limited operational experience with spatial data standards but are currently looking at extending the spatial attributes attached to a number of ABS data sets to enable us to provide economic and social data for a greater range of spatial areas.

With respect to the other concerns, we have generally moved quickly into

new areas such as environment and have a good international reputation in this respect. However, we do recognise we have not moved as fast as many users may wish but it is often difficult to move quickly in new and conceptually testing fields of statistics. The resources devoted to environment statistics have continued to increase over the last ten years and the ABS will consider proposals to devote more resources to this field even if they do require some reallocation of resources from other statistical fields.

The Census and Statistics Act does prevent the ABS from releasing identifiable data irrespective of whether it is collected from surveys or through data received through other agencies. This is necessary for us to maintain and trust and confidence of respondents and the high levels of cooperation that we currently receive. However, this does not preclude other agencies who already hold this data from continuing to release this data if they wish. There may be privacy or commercial sensitivity concerns which they may have to manage.

Current situation with environment and resource data

Coordination work is often hampered by intergovernmental and interdepartmental rivalries. Where there is mistrust there will consequently be a reluctance to share data. Another barrier to compilation and coordination of data is the fear some people have of losing control of

their data, both in the way they choose to maintain it and in the way the data are interpreted. Notwithstanding these problems some progress has been achieved. There is evidence of an increasing willingness to compromise and build coordinated data sets and an increase in capacity and capability being built up over time. Many successful output products have been the result of joint projects e.g. WA land use and vegetation mapping. Some fields such as the geosciences act together well. Nether the less there are still significant problems in the sharing of data.

Another major issue is the lack of resources allocated to coordination activities. It would be interesting to know what proportion of resources spent on current monitoring activities have been allocated to coordination.

There are a number of existing groups involved in coordination activities. They take a range of forms and have had varying degrees of success. Some, such as air quality standards, are complex, broad in number and have taken a long time to develop. They have been developed under the coordination of intergovernmental agreements and ministerial councils. Other smaller groups such as the National Irrigation Efficiency Group attempt to bring together the relevant players of a small field and operate on a basis of goodwill.

Another major contribution to broad level coordination is undertaken by Australian Surveying and Land Information Group (AUSLIG) which has responsibility for policy, standards and coordination associated with the

delivery of national and international spatial information programs and for the implementation of the Australian Spatial Data Infrastructure (ASDI) at the Commonwealth level. Australia New Zealand Land Information Council (ANZLIC) coordinates the development of ASDI. The ASDI provides for a directory and improved access to spatial data. It addressed issues such as custodianships, copyright, and meta data guidelines.

The ASDI does not cover all environment and resource data as not all data have a strong spatial component. Also the ANZLIC meta data model does not fit all data well. For example, the ABS social and economic data would lose much of its utility if forced into the ASDI standards. Hence some important data sets fall outside the scope of the ASDI initiative.

Under ASDI the responsibility for development of standards rests with the identified lead agencies. This has had very mixed results to date with some fields being well developed and others having undertaken very little development. Also there has been some criticism that consultation by lead agencies with other stakeholders has been patchy.

The National Land and Water Resources Audit (NLWRA) is building a dissemination system in the form of an Australian Atlas that displays the results of data compilation and analysis.

Key attributes of expanded role for ABS

Goals to be achieved

Identify priority national data sets and bring them up to defined national standards.

Ensure strong coordination between various jurisdictions so that data collected are able to be integrated and serve many purposes.

Eliminating duplication and reduce the costs associated with collection and collation activities.

Improve knowledge about and accessibility of data sets and reduce the costs associated with accessing data.

Authority

ABS has legislative authority to undertake activities associated with improved coordination and standards for statistical data.

Independence

To be effective a coordination role must be, and be seen to be, independent of any particular jurisdiction or policy interests. The ABS has this statutory independence and enjoys strong community and parliamentary support for this independence.

Partnerships

Coordination by the ABS will occur through building partnerships with all stakeholders. The ABS will franchise and strengthen existing mechanisms and build links with industry and the community. Where relevant existing coordination mechanisms are in place the ABS will work within these in the

development of any standards or measurement protocols. For example, the ABS could support the lead agencies identified in the ASDI strategy. The exact role the ABS undertakes for any particular ESD data set would depend on the associated circumstances and could be along the lines of one of the three broad forms outlined above.

Building data management capability

Where jurisdictions and agencies have custodian responsibilities the associated data management capability necessary for the maintenance and dissemination of data has several layers. If, required the ABS could provide expert support in the establishment of data systems and quality control measures where appropriate and funded.

For cases where the ABS has been accepted as the appropriate custodian of data, the ABS has the infrastructure that will allow the storage, archiving and public dissemination of statistical data bases and the associated meta data. This could be used to facilitate the dissemination of environment data to all potential users. It is important to note that ABS legislation precludes selected release to specified users only and we will not enter into any agreements along these lines.

Resources

There is a limit to what the ABS could do without additional resources.

Budget supplementation would be required to establish new work on standards and measurement protocols. A small amount of the funding available for ESD

work could be set aside for these type of activities. Coordination is a national activity with benefits for the States as well as the Commonwealth. A shared funding arrangement may be the most appropriate way forward.

Expertise

The expertise to develop standards for ESD data sets does not reside in any one organisation. The ABS recognises the need to bring together a range of specialist and generalist experts and will do so through building partnerships and employing consultants and advisers or acquiring the necessary skilled people through secondments.

Links to decision making

A strategic planning activity would be the first step in an expanded role for the ABS. It would including a needs analysis to identify the priority data sets and collection activities to be coordinated. The strategic plan would define projects in terms of deliverables, timetables, resources, and roles and responsibilities of jurisdictions. Client specifications would draw on such initiatives as Agriculture, Fisheries and forestry -

Australia's (AFFA) National Statement on Natural Resources Management for Sustainable Agriculture the results of the next State of the Environment Report and would build on NLWRA recommendations for ongoing data management.

Conclusion

The ABS supports recommendation 7.4 in the Productivity Commission report but there is a limit to what can be done without additional resourcing.

In fulfilling this role we would want to work collaboratively with the key stakeholders, particularly those holding the data sets of interest. We do not want to get involved where the existing coordination arrangements are working satisfactorily and good statistical standards are in place. We do not want to get involved if there is not broad stakeholder support for our involvement. There are too many other important things to do where our resources could be used to good effect.

As this paper outlines, there are different forms of supporting recommendation 7.4. The most appropriate form will depend on the ESD field and to the extent to which data exists and satisfactory coordination arrangements already exists. We propose working with the key stakeholders to establish in which ESD fields the ABS can add most value to advance the objective of having better quality and more accessible statistics. As part of that activity we would establish the most appropriate form of ABS support for the designated ESD fields.