



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Economic Research Service's Data Product Review Council Review Process



Inspection Report 14801-0001-24

September 2022

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ERS' DPRC reviews are designed to evaluate ERS data products' adherence to six OMB quality standards and attributes; however, ERS has not performed a DPRC review since July 2019.

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to evaluate the ERS' DPRC review process for data products to ensure their adherence to data quality standards.

REVIEWED

We reviewed applicable OMB guidance, as well as documentation related to ERS' DPRC reviews.

RECOMMENDS

We recommend that ERS develop and implement a written compensating control to address adherence to standards in the absence of the resources needed to perform DPRC reviews and update its website to timely inform interested stakeholders of any changes in how ERS is evaluating its data products against OMB data quality standards and attributes. We also recommend that ERS assess the data products it disseminated while DPRC reviews were paused, beginning in July 2019, and determine if it needs to complete DPRC reviews or apply other compensating controls for those data products.

WHAT OIG FOUND

In fiscal year 2014, the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) established the Data Product Review Council (DPRC) to provide comprehensive evaluations of the agency's data products to ensure that the agency adheres to the highest standards of quality and transparency, and to provide feedback and guidance to data product authors and their managers and identify areas for improvement. DPRC reviews are designed to evaluate how these products adhere to the six Office of Management and Budget (OMB) data quality standards and attributes of: purpose, utility, objectivity, integrity, transparency, and accessibility.

However, we found that ERS has not performed any DPRC reviews since July 2019. An ERS official stated that this occurred because ERS did not have the staff available to perform DPRC reviews when the agency experienced a loss of approximately 75 percent of its personnel after USDA announced that it would relocate ERS' daily operations to Kansas City, Missouri. Meanwhile, ERS did not have a compensating control for the lack of DPRC reviews. While an ERS official stated that peer reviews ensured all data products met the highest level of data quality standards, this official could not provide us with documentation to support that peer reviews ensured that the agency's data products were reviewed against these OMB data quality standards. As a result, ERS has reduced assurance that the products released during the period met the six OMB quality attributes and standards those reviews are designed to evaluate. ERS agreed with our recommendations and we accepted ERS' management decision on all three recommendations in this report.



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

United States Department of Agriculture



DATE: September 28, 2022

INSPECTION

NUMBER: 14801-0001-24

TO: Dr. Spiro Stefanou
Administrator
Economic Research Service

ATTN: Lisa Baldus
Director, Financial Management Division
Agricultural Research Service

FROM: Yarisís Rivera-Rojas
Acting Assistant Inspector General for Audit

SUBJECT: Economic Research Service's Data Product Review Council Review Process

This report presents the results of the subject review. Your written response to the official draft is included in its entirety at the end of the report. We have incorporated excerpts from your response, and the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) position, into the relevant sections of the report. Based on your written response, we are accepting management decision for all three inspection recommendations in the report, and no further response to this office is necessary. Please follow your internal agency procedures in forwarding final action correspondence to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO).

In accordance with Departmental Regulation 1720-1, final action needs to be taken within 1 year of each management decision to prevent being listed in the Department's annual Agency Financial Report. For agencies other than OCFO, please follow your internal agency procedures in forwarding final action correspondence to OCFO.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended to us by members of your staff during our inspection fieldwork and subsequent discussions. This report contains publicly available information and will be posted in its entirety to our website (<https://usdaoig.oversight.gov>) in the near future.

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Background and Objectives

Background

One of the Economic Research Service's (ERS) responsibilities as a Principal Federal Statistical Agency is to compile, analyze, and disseminate data products. ERS' data products include a broad spectrum of products—including estimates, forecasts, and economic and statistical indicators—relating to agriculture, food, environment, and rural development. The data for these products are compiled from diverse sources where ERS adds value in the form of recompilation and/or subject matter expertise. Key stakeholders of ERS data products—such as the White House and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) policy officials, Congress, program administrators and managers, other Federal agencies, State and local government officials, and farm and industry groups—use information from ERS' data products to make informed decisions about the United States agricultural sector. ERS disseminates its information to key stakeholders and the public through an array of outlets, including the ERS website.

As a Principal Federal Statistical Agency, ERS is required to provide objective, accurate, and timely information on the subject areas in its purview. To ensure the information provided meets these criteria, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requires ERS to adhere to data quality guidelines and standards. These guidelines and standards require agencies to develop a process for reviewing the quality of information to ensure that it meets OMB's standards. These guidelines further describe the quality attributes that agencies are required to follow to ensure they embed quality standards in data products they provide to key stakeholders and the public.

In fiscal year (FY) 2014, ERS established the Data Product Review Council (DPRC) and began performing DPRC reviews to provide comprehensive evaluations of the agency's data products. The stated purpose of these reviews is to ensure that the agency adheres to the highest standards of quality and transparency, and to provide feedback and guidance to data product authors and their managers and identify areas for improvement. DPRC reviews are designed to include a review of six OMB data quality standards and attributes. These quality attributes and standards include: purpose, utility, objectivity, integrity, transparency, and accessibility. ERS publishes its data product quality standards, the evaluation checklist for these reviews, and a summary of the results of these reviews on its website. According to the ERS website, as of June 2022, the last DPRC reviews were performed in July 2019.

Objectives

We evaluated ERS' DPRC review process for data products to ensure their adherence to data quality standards.

Finding 1: ERS DPRC Review Completion

We found that ERS has not completed a DPRC review since July 2019. These reviews are designed to assess ERS data products against OMB data quality attributes and standards. An ERS official stated that these reviews were paused because ERS lost a significant number of personnel following the agency's office relocation from Washington, D.C., to Kansas City, Missouri. A summary report issued after the last round of DPRC reviews were performed also recommended that the agency delay the next round of reviews due to impending staffing changes resulting from the agency's office relocation. As a result, ERS' stakeholders have reduced assurance that the products released during the period met the six OMB quality attributes and standards those reviews are designed to evaluate.

Under the Paperwork Reduction Act, OMB—among other responsibilities—is required to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal Statistical System of the United States, as well as the integrity, objectivity, impartiality, utility, and confidentiality of information collected for statistical purposes. OMB is also charged with developing and overseeing the implementation of Governmentwide principles, policies, data quality standards, and guidelines concerning the development, presentation, and dissemination of statistical information. The Information Quality Act requires OMB, as well as all other Federal agencies, to maximize the objectivity, utility, and integrity of information—including statistical information—disseminated by the agency. DPRC reviews assess ERS data products' adherence to OMB and Information Quality Act requirements. Specifically, DPRC reviews are designed to evaluate ERS data products' adherence to six OMB quality attributes and standards: purpose, utility, objectivity, integrity, transparency, and accessibility.

When we began our inspection in September 2021, ERS' website stated that the agency performed DPRC reviews in spring-summer 2019. While the website provided the timeframe of the latest DPRC reviews, the agency's website did not indicate that the agency had paused DPRC reviews.

An ERS official stated that the agency paused DPRC reviews in spring-summer 2019 because the agency did not have the personnel to complete them. This official stated that ERS experienced a loss of approximately 75 percent of the agency's personnel after USDA announced that it would relocate ERS' daily operations to Kansas City, Missouri, in June 2019. This official also stated that the agency needed to use its available personnel on higher priority tasks because ERS performs DPRC reviews after it releases data products to the public. Furthermore a summary issued after the completion of DPRC reviews for summer 2019 reported that the DPRC is important and high-value, but the DPRC committee proposed delaying the next round of reviews because of the impending staffing changes caused by the agency's relocation, which was effective FY 2020.

While we understand ERS' decision to pause DPRC reviews due to a lack of resources, DPRC reviews are an important control in ERS' quality control process. ERS did not have a compensating control for the lack of DPRC reviews. While an ERS official stated that peer reviews ensured all data products met the highest level of data quality standards, this ERS official could not provide us with documentation to support that peer reviews ensured that the

agency's data products were reviewed against these OMB data quality standards. Given the absence of documentation supporting this assertion, we concluded that that ERS did not evaluate its data products against the six identified standards and attributes during this period, although its website indicates this is the review the agency performs on the products to ensure adherence to these standards. If ERS is performing other tasks to ensure its data products meet data quality standards, it needs to timely update its website to inform stakeholders as to what ERS is doing related to the review of these products. The lack of DPRC reviews, or a compensating control, means ERS' stakeholders have reduced assurance that these products are adhering to the six OMB quality attributes and standards of purpose, utility, objectivity, integrity, transparency, and accessibility.

ERS recognized the importance of DPRC reviews when the Administrator issued a memorandum on October 6, 2021, announcing the new members of the DPRC and that reviews would begin again in 2021. ERS reported to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) that it performed three DPRC reviews during the winter 2021/2022 cycle. These reviews were reflected on the agency website as of July 2022. This update occurred outside the scope of our inspection. Therefore, we did not evaluate the results of the winter 2021/2022 reviews.

ERS officials agreed with our finding and recommendations. If future events prevent ERS from conducting DPRC reviews, the agency needs to have a written, compensating control in place to ensure that it adheres to OMB data quality standards without DPRC reviews. Furthermore, the agency needs to maintain up-to-date information on its website to timely inform interested stakeholders of changes to how ERS is evaluating its data products against OMB data quality standards and attributes. Additionally, ERS should assess the data products it disseminated while DPRC reviews were paused, beginning in July 2019, and determine if it needs to complete DPRC reviews or apply other compensating controls on those data products.

Recommendation 1

Develop and implement a written compensating control to address adherence to standards in the absence of the resources needed to perform DPRC reviews.

Agency Response

ERS agrees with this recommendation. By September 1, 2023, ERS will establish a written procedure for ensuring adherence to ERS's Data Quality Standards should the agency be in a situation where it lacks the resources to implement the periodic DPRC reviews of ERS data products.

OIG Position

We accept management decision on this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

Establish a process to ensure ERS updates its website to timely inform interested stakeholders of any changes in how ERS is evaluating its data products against OMB data quality standards and attributes.

Agency Response

ERS agrees with this recommendation. By September 1, 2023, ERS will establish a written procedure to ensure the agency website is updated in a timely manner to inform the public of any significant changes in the DPRC process for ensuring ERS data products meet the ERS Data Quality Standards, which include adherence to the OMB Quality Attributes and Standards.

OIG Position

We accept management decision on this recommendation.

Recommendation 3

Assess the data products disseminated while DPRC reviews were paused, beginning in July 2019, and determine if it needs to complete DPRC reviews or apply other compensating controls on those data products.

Agency Response

ERS agrees with this recommendation. By September 1, 2023, ERS will review the data products that were disseminated between September 1, 2019 and September 1, 2021 to determine a schedule for conducting DPRC reviews on these products or whether other compensating controls are needed.

OIG Position

We accept management decision on this recommendation.

Scope and Methodology

We conducted an inspection of ERS' DPRC review process for data products to ensure their adherence to data quality standards. We performed our inspection work remotely due to coronavirus disease 2019 restrictions. We conducted our fieldwork from September 2021 through July 2022.

The scope of our assignment included DPRC reviews completed between October 1, 2019, and July 31, 2021. As no DPRC reviews were performed during that scope period, we did not test the results of those reviews.

To accomplish our inspection objectives, we:

- reviewed the Data Product Quality section of ERS' website,¹ which includes a section on DPRC reviews, to obtain an understanding of the purpose of DPRC reviews and the current status of DPRC reviews;
- reviewed applicable guidelines, including OMB guidelines, related to the DPRC review process in order to obtain an understanding of the information that ERS evaluates in its data products during these DPRC reviews;
- interviewed ERS officials to obtain an understanding of the DPRC review process and the reasons why ERS paused the DPRC reviews; and
- reviewed documentation supporting the actions ERS took to pause the DPRC reviews and announce their reinstatement.

We conducted the inspection in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation.² Those standards require that we perform the inspection to obtain sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our conclusion based on our review objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides reasonable basis for our conclusion based on our review.

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/about-ers/policies-and-standards/data-product-quality/>

² CIGIE, Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation (Jan. 2012).

Abbreviations

CIGIE.....	Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency
DPRC.....	Data Product Review Council
ERS.....	Economic Research Service
FY.....	fiscal year
OIG.....	Office of Inspector General
OMB.....	Office of Management and Budget
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture

**ERS'
Response to Inspection
Report**



Date: August 29, 2022

Inspection

Number: 14801-0001-24

TO: Yarisis Rivera-Rojas
Acting Assistant Inspector General for Audit

FROM: Dr. Spiro Stefanou, Administrator
Economic Research Service

SUBJECT: Economic Research Service's Data Product Review Council Review Process

CC: Lisa Baldus, Director,
Financial Management Division
Agricultural Research Service

This letter responds to the official draft report for inspection number 14801-0001-24, Economic Research Service's Data Product Review Council Review Process. Specifically, the Economic Research Service (ERS) is responding to the three recommendations in the report.

OIG Recommendation 1:

Develop and implement a written compensating control to address adherence to standards in the absence of the resources needed to perform DPRC [Data Product Review Council] reviews.

ERS Response: ERS will establish a written procedure for ensuring adherence to ERS's Data Quality Standards should the agency be in a situation where it lacks the resources to implement the periodic DPRC reviews of ERS data products.

Estimated Completion Date: September 1, 2023

OIG Recommendation 2:

Establish a process to ensure ERS updates its website to timely inform interested stakeholders of any changes in how ERS is evaluating its data products against OMB data quality standards and attributes.

ERS Response: ERS will establish a written procedure to ensure the agency website is updated in a timely manner to inform the public of any significant changes in the DPRC process for

ensuring ERS data products meet the ERS Data Quality Standards, which include adherence to the OMB Quality Attributes and Standards.

Estimated Completion Date: September 1, 2023

OIG Recommendation 3:

Assess the data products disseminated while DRPC reviews were paused, beginning in July 2019, and determine if it needs to complete DRPC reviews or apply other compensating controls on those data products.

ERS Response: ERS will review the data products that were disseminated between September 1, 2019 and September 1, 2021 to determine a schedule for conducting DRPC reviews on these products or whether other compensating controls are needed.

Estimated Completion Date: September 1, 2023

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