

BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

A breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics occurs where one or more provisions of the Code were not followed in situations where an exemption or exception had not been approved by the UK Statistics Authority's Head of Assessment, as required in paragraph (xii) of the Code's preamble. Rules on pre-release access to statistics are covered in the relevant Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Orders; the Code applies as if it includes these orders.

1 Background Information

Name of Statistical Output (including web link if relevant)

Woodland Area, Planting and Restocking
<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/inf-d-7aqknx>

Name of Producer Organisation

Forestry Commission

Name and contact details of person submitting this report, and date of report

Simon Gilliam 0131 314 6280 simon.gilliam@forestry.gsi.gov.uk
10 June 2010, updated 14 June

2 Circumstances of Breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2: Release Practices – Practice 7

Date of occurrence

8 June 2010

Nature of breach (including links with previous breaches, if any)

One of the figures, for UK new planting, was included in an email by FC GB Press Office to 18 recipients, mostly senior and press office staff in FC GB and national offices, two days before publication. The email could be read as saying that the Woodland Trust, a non-government organisation (NGO) had the figure, and was interpreted as such by some, but this was not the intended meaning and was not the case. The figure was not distributed more widely before the due publication time.

Reasons for breach

No pre-release access had been agreed for these statistics. One member of the FC GB press office acts as part of the statistics production chain, preparing a news release for publication alongside the statistics release. For this purpose, he receives the key figures a few days before publication.

The FC GB Press Officer became aware that the Woodland Trust was planning a press

release that could be linked to this statistics release. The Woodland Trust would have been aware of the direction of change, from a Scottish PQ and other public statements based on management statistics, so would have been able to prepare most of their release before having seen the official statistics, and just add relevant statistics when published. There is no evidence that the Woodland Trust had seen the official statistics before publication, and the Press Officer understood them to be working from a very different figure. A link to the Woodland Trust news release of 10 June (that appeared shortly after the statistics release was published) is in (5) below.

The FC GB Press Officer wished to prepare relevant staff to respond to the Woodland Trust release if they felt necessary. Before doing so, he checked the figure mentioned by the Woodland Trust against the draft official statistics figure provided by the relevant statistician. He then sent an email to relevant staff that would be likely to be involved in any response, including senior staff, policy leads and press office staff. The number of recipients is relatively large, because forestry is devolved, and in England responsibility is shared with Defra, and there could be a potential response at GB or country level.

This email could have been written without quoting any unpublished statistics. However the UK figure from the draft release was included in the email without proper thought. This was not done in the belief that the figure was already public or already held by the NGO; it was a simple oversight.

3 Reactions and Impact

As far as we know, the figure was not distributed more widely or misused. Most recipients would already have been aware of the direction of change, from their access to management information, from a Scottish PQ that had been answered using the management information, and/or from other public statements of concern about the low level of new planting.

The figure did not appear in the public domain before the scheduled statistics release, and the information was not used by any of the recipients to prepare country-level responses to the Woodland Trust press release. There was no adverse public reaction or publicity to the breach, because nothing was released to the public as a result of the breach.

4 Corrective Actions Taken (include short-term actions, and long-term changes made to procedures)

Within 20 minutes of the press officer's email being sent, statistics staff had emailed to all recipients to say that the quoted figure should not be used before publication, and that if it had been passed to anyone else to let us know. This was effective in stopping the figure from being used. Recipients were not told to destroy the email, as any such instruction would have been difficult to implement in practice, and would have required extra staff to be involved.

The issue has been discussed with the FC GB Press Officer and Head of Communications, who have apologised and recognise that the figure should not have been quoted in the email. Following the incident, the handling of draft figures or draft releases by the FC GB Press Officer as part of the statistics production chain has been reviewed, and it has been agreed that any should be accompanied by a prominent reminder that the draft is only to be used for preparing the news release for publication, which should help prevent similar incidents occurring in the future.

The Forestry Commission will review whether some pre-release access in final form for these statistics should be introduced, so that if similar preparation is desired for response to

a future release then it will be possible during the pre-release access (PRA) period. Introducing such arrangements for all FC official statistics with immediate effect would be contrary to the principles of PRA, so will not be done.

5 Any other relevant supporting material (including link to published statements about this breach)

Published statement on FC website:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7zhk6a>

Woodland Trust news release of 10 June:

<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/news-media/releases/Pages/britain-becoming-deforested.aspx>

The Independent newspaper prepared an article on 11 June based on the Woodland Trust press release. After publication of the statistics and before publication of the article, the FC GB Press Office prepared a draft response, but this was mainly about the policy responses that had already been announced rather than the statistics.

Independent newspaper article of 11 June:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/worrying-slump-in-tree-planting-prompts-fears-of-deforestation-1997344.html>

The statistics release and Woodland Trust press release were also linked in Royal Forestry Society e-News on 11 June.