

BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

This document reports a breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, or the relevant Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Orders, to which the Code applies as if it included these orders.

1. Background information

Name of Statistical Output (including weblink to the relevant output or 'landing page')

Preliminary estimates of canopy cover change in British woodland (unpublished)

Name of Producer Organisation

Forestry Commission (FC)

Name and contact details of the statistical Head of Profession (Lead Official in an Arm's Length Body) submitting this report, and date of report

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2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2: Release Practices - Practice 8: Wrongful release

Date of occurrence

On or before 11 March 2016

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

A journalist sought confirmation of an order-of-magnitude figure from a draft release that had been circulated to a restricted list of experts for quality assurance. The journalist was not on the list of those receiving pre-release access for quality assurance and the figure was not in the public domain.

The experts receiving pre-release access are all listed in the document showing pre-release

access for QA purposes, available at www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-83mfrz. The draft was provided by email, with instructions not to share the statistics more widely included in the covering email.

It is believed that a recipient of the draft may have mentioned a result from the report in very broad terms (i.e. highly rounded) to the journalist and/ or to another party who has passed this on to the journalist.

Reasons for breach

The breach is believed to have occurred because someone on the list of those receiving pre-release access for quality assurance purposes may have divulged an indication of one of the figures from the report to someone not on the list.

3. Reactions and impact (both within the producer body and outside)

Forestry Commission press office responded to the journalist, explaining why it cannot comment, and referring to the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and to the latest published figure on this issue.

A release date has not yet been set for the release, because the quality assurance process has identified further work that is required to ensure the figures are presented in a meaningful way that also clarifies the limitations of the data.

On receipt of the Forestry Commission's response, the journalist noted his intention to proceed with publication of an article; this was published on 20 March. There has been no further impact.

4. Corrective actions taken to prevent reoccurrence of such a breach (include short-term actions, and long-term changes made to procedures)

All recipients of pre-release access for quality assurance for this release have been alerted and reminded of their obligations.

We are strengthening the wording that accompanies all FC Official Statistics releases by adopting standard wording to accompany all future pre-release access for quality assurance purposes. All producers of Official Statistics have been alerted to the breach and to this change, to minimise the risk of a future breach.

The issue has been discussed at the April 2016 meeting of the Expert Group on Timber & Trade Statistics, who have a role in quality assuring several of the Forestry Commission's Official Statistics. As a result, the terms of reference for the group is being amended to specifically include reference to the need for compliance with the Code of Practice on Official Statistics.

5. Links to published statements about this breach

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