

Distr.
GENERAL

CES/AC.61/2003/3
17 April 2003

Original: ENGLISH

**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR
EUROPE**

**STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE
EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES
(EUROSTAT)**

**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN
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**FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL
ORGANISATION (FAO)**

**Joint UNECE/EUROSTAT/FAO/OECD
Meeting on Food and Agricultural Statistics
in Europe**
(Geneva, 2-4 July 2003)

**ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC
CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT
(OECD)**

DATA COLLECTION THROUGH THE INTERNET IN THE NETHERLANDS

Submitted by LASER Netherlands*

I. INTRODUCTION

1. LASER is a payment agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries. It provides services to the Ministry with respect to data collection, registration, quality control of those data, processing requests for subsidy, etc.
2. The Central Statistical Office in the Netherlands depends on LASER for data collection, quality control, registration and distribution of data for statistical purposes in the agricultural sector.

II. HISTORY

3. The first Internet pilot project started in June 2000. It was initiated by LASER. The purpose of the project was to prepare electronic data collection for 2001 with limited scope and a limited number of clients (a representative sample of 14,000), in order to gain

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experience with the preparation and implementation of such a system. It was decided that data collection for agricultural statistics was most suited to serve this purpose. Of course, the intention was to enlarge the scope of electronic data collection for all kinds of purposes and for all clients willing and able to apply this system in the long term.

4. The criteria for the development of the site were:
 - easy to understand and easy to use for clients;
 - high similarity with the traditional forms;
 - it would take less time to fill in than the paper version.

5. At the time, the possibility of adding an electronic signature for protection of individual information was already discussed, but not yet implemented.

6. The result in 2001 was somewhat disappointing. The number of farmers sending their information through the Internet was 777, around 5% of the sample. Not a very impressive result, but enough as a learning experience.

7. It became apparent that it was necessary to put more effort into the development of the site as well as into informing and educating the users of the site.

8. A complicating factor for further development was the political decision to combine data collection in the agricultural sector for statistical purposes with those for agricultural subsidies (EU-McSharry arable crop payment scheme) and environmental taxes. Diminishing the administrative burden of the agricultural sector has been high on the political agenda in the last few years. Effort needs to be put into multiple use of already collected and registered information. This meant that a completely new concept for the site had to be developed.

9. Development of the combined data collection through the Internet for 2002 started in July 2001. Especially the application in which farmers have to indicate on a map which plots they use, was difficult to develop according to the above mentioned criteria. An external partner, specialised in GIS-applications, helped to develop the user interface. In 2002, the result was again disappointing. The number of farmers sending their information through the Internet was 1425.

10. The combined data collection for 2003 did not change very much compared to 2002. This meant that the development of the site for 2003 could build upon the previous experience.

11. A number of improvements have been made:
 - A system of electronic signatures was added to simplify and secure the use of the site;
 - The performance of the site has been significantly improved;
 - A user-friendly wizard has been included;
 - Target group differentiation: different possibilities based on different needs of farmers and intermediaries;

- It is now possible for the client to make printouts of the site.

12. Each year, the evaluation of the project made clear that the technical side of the project was the easiest to adapt and develop. The most crucial factors especially in 2002/2003 regarding the effectiveness of the project and the time spent by project staff were the changes in the institutional environment. These changes slowed down the decision making on the continuity of the project, the finances, staffing issues, the definition of the desired output, contracts with external partners, etc.

13. Another important factor is the streamlining and integration of the development of an Internet system and its outcomes into the daily routine and existing working procedures.

III. COST-EFFECTIVENESS

14. It is very difficult to say what exactly the costs and benefits are at a specific point in time. The use of the Internet for data collection is a development which takes several years. Each year the scope of the Internet application widens as well as the number of users. The main advantage of data collection through the Internet is the possibility of building in error traps, preventing clients to make mistakes. Consequently the implementing agency can reduce the number of administrative checks and reduce its running costs.

15. This year the target for Internet use is 20%. For the arable crop payment scheme this constitutes a number of 10,000 Internet applicants, which means a cost reduction of 4,700 administration hours for the implementing agency.

16. For the agricultural statistics data collection this constitutes a number of 20,000 forms through the Internet, which means a cost reduction of 800 administration hours.

IV. THE NEAR FUTURE

17. Evaluation with groups of Internet users showed their expectation that the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries will continue to improve and develop the use of the Internet. In their opinion all available and registered information should be linked and used for multiple purposes.

18. In the near future data collection will become superfluous, as farmers (and other clients of the system) inform the Ministry of relevant changes. Through such a, hopefully mainly electronic, mutation system, the Ministry and its agencies can directly access the information they need to carry out their tasks.

19. Another possible new development currently under consideration is the direct electronic linking of individual farm management systems to electronic applications of the Ministry.
