



Highlights of [GAO-05-644](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Information Quality Act (IQA) required the Office of Management and Budget to issue guidelines for ensuring the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information disseminated by federal agencies. As part of our long-term examination of the quality of federal information, under the Comptroller General's authority, we reviewed how the act was implemented by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and assessed the transparency of the documentation supporting its Census of Agriculture. NASS is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

What GAO Recommends

To help enhance the transparency of the Census of Agriculture, we recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture direct NASS to (1) ensure that census products fully address NASS's guidelines for data documentation or at least contain links to such information, and (2) document and post on NASS's Web site its procedures for handling data correction requests not filed under IQA. NASS agreed with our findings and described the steps it is taking in response to our recommendations. Additional actions, consistent with our recommendations, would enhance NASS's efforts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-644.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Orice Williams at (202) 512-6806 or williamso@gao.gov.

INFORMATION QUALITY ACT

National Agricultural Statistics Service Implements First Steps, but Documentation of Census of Agriculture Could Be Improved

What GAO Found

NASS fulfilled its various procedural responsibilities and reporting requirements under the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) guidelines for implementing the act. For example, NASS drafted its own implementation guidance, and developed a mechanism allowing affected parties to request the correction of information they believe is of poor quality. As a result of our review, NASS has also taken steps to better document the criteria it uses to evaluate data users' input on the content of the Census of Agriculture.

The Census of Agriculture Provides a Detailed Picture of U.S. Farms and Ranches



Source: USDA.

Building on these efforts, better documentation could improve the transparency of census data products. For example, the nine key products from the 2002 Census we examined lacked, among other things, discussions of any data limitations. This is contrary to NASS's own guidelines for ensuring transparency, which stress the importance of describing the methods, data sources, and other items to help users understand how the information was designed and produced.

Although NASS complied with OMB's requirement to establish a mechanism under IQA to address requests to correct information, NASS has not documented its approach for handling correction requests not filed under IQA (NASS handles these correction requests using an existing, informal method). Agency officials told us that data users have been satisfied with the way NASS had responded to these requests. However, because NASS does not document its informal procedures for handling correction requests and lacks a recordkeeping system to log and track them, NASS could not provide us with specific data on the number of such requests it has handled, the nature of those requests, and whether and how they were addressed.