



FARM STRUCTURE SURVEY 1999/2000
NATIONAL METHODOLOGICAL REPORT

Member State: BELGIUM

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SUMMARY

The 2000 survey of the structure of agricultural holdings was part of the traditional agricultural census that has been conducted in Belgium every year for the last 40 years or so. The definitions of the features that are surveyed comply with the definitions laid down by Community legislation. The requested information is collected by the municipal authorities, who contact the farmers and update the register of holdings. Since the survey is compulsory by law, the non-response rate is always very low. Data plausibility checks are primarily based on a detailed comparison of each variable with the previous year's results. Provisional composite figures covering about 30% of the declarations were published at the end of September 2000. The final file of census data was available at the end of February 2001.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

As one of the founding members of the European Union, Belgium has taken part in the survey on the structure of agricultural holdings ever since it was first introduced. The 2000 survey was conducted as part of the agricultural and horticultural census of 15 May 2000. Belgium has organised such a census every year since 1960. The very first agricultural census was carried out in 1846. Between then and 1960, there was eight censuses, conducted at intervals of 10-15 years.

1.2. Legislation¹

The agricultural and horticultural census of 15 May 2000 was based on the Royal Decree of 1 June 1992, as amended by the ministerial orders of 30 March 1994, 4 March 1995, 2 May 1996 and 7 May 1997. This Royal Decree is based on the Law of 4 July 1962 on public statistics, as amended by the Law of 1 August 1985, especially with regard to Articles 5-7, 14, 16 and 18-13. The 2000 structural survey did not require any amendment to this Royal Decree, nor the implementation of any special legislation.

The *Institut National de Statistique* (INS), which comes under the Ministry of Economic Affairs, is in charge of the survey. The actual conduct of the survey is the responsibility of the *bourgmestres* (mayors) as representatives of the central authority and senior officials of the municipalities, and they delegate collection of the information to one or more municipal census officials. The Statistical Law of 4 July 1962 requires any person involved in the collection or processing of data to observe strict confidentiality.

Participation in the agricultural census is compulsory. Those who fail to submit a declaration or who do not provide the required information in a precise and thorough manner are liable to be punished in accordance with the Statistical Law.

At no time during the organisation or conduct of the 2000 survey was any information used from administrative records.

2. CONTENT

2.1. Characteristics

The agricultural census is defined as a collection of a whole series of information on agricultural holdings: legal status and type of farming, characteristics of the agricultural labour force, areas under crops, numbers of animals, type of equipment, information about farm buildings and installations, etc. The definitions of the characteristics that are surveyed comply with those

¹ From 2001 there are new legislative bases in Belgium for the agricultural census, which has been radically overhauled with regard both to the questionnaire and to the methods of data collections.

laid down in the Community legislation establishing the survey on the structural of agricultural holdings. Other characteristics, or more detailed characteristics, are also surveyed in response to certain national requirements.

2.2. Scope

The census applies to all legal or natural persons who have an agricultural holding located in Belgium and who, on 15 May of the year in question, produce *for the purpose of selling* animal or vegetable products, including those produced under contract. The census also covers, provided they farm an area of at least one are or have animals, even if they do not produce anything for the purpose of selling: prison establishments, old people's homes, rest homes, hospices or similar establishments, religious and other communities, research or test establishments, nursery services of public bodies producing for their own needs, holdings run by educational establishments. Undertakings involved in agricultural work and cooperatives for the pooled use of agricultural equipment are also required to take part in the census, although their data are not included in the structural survey if they have no agricultural output.

2.3. Reference periods

The 2000 survey refers to a holding's situation on 15 May 2000. The characteristics of the labour force refer to the 12 months preceding the survey, i.e. from 16 May 1999 to 15 May 2000. Most of the data were collected between 15 May and 15 June 2000.

2.4. Questionnaires

The 2000 agricultural census was conducted solely using printed forms. Two basic forms were used: "form 1", the traditional agricultural census form, covering the characteristics of the holding, and "form 1*bis*" used to collect the detailed information on the labour force that is required by the structural survey. Additional forms are filled in by those with orchard or nursery holdings or if an industrial accident occurred on the holding between 16 May 1999 and 15 May 2000.

3. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

3.1. Organisation of the survey

Since the agricultural census is an annual event, it comes under the regular activities of the agricultural statistics unit at the INS, and the structural survey does not require any special organisation to be set up.

A central department in Brussels is in charge of the overall organisation of the survey (preparation of documents, dispatch to municipalities, processing of data, publication of results, etc). This department also has particular responsibility for contact with the municipalities of the two Brabant provinces

in the country, as well as for checking and encoding the forms of the surveys conducted in these municipalities. Four local INS offices perform this work for the eight other provinces, i.e. two provinces per office.

The municipal authorities are responsible for conducting the agricultural census and interview farmers either on their holdings or at the municipal offices. The census is publicised by notices and the farmers are individually contacted, generally by post, with the help of address lists provided by the INS. The municipal authorities are also responsible for contacting any new agricultural holdings that have been set up in the previous year within the municipality, and in this way the register of holdings is kept up to date. Of the 589 municipalities in Belgium, 582 host on average 106 agricultural holdings (with a minimum of one holding and a maximum of 580 in 2000).

The municipal census officers receive a "census manual" giving the main explanations that are needed to understand the forms. The devolution of day-to-day management of the survey to the four provincial offices facilitates contacts between the municipal authorities and the INS for dealing with any problems that arise. The annual repetition of the census means that someone at the municipal offices often acquires some familiarity with agriculture, and this helps to improve understanding of the sector and contacts with the farmers and hence the quality of the survey.

3.2. Collection and encoding of data

All the census information is collected on printed forms. At the end of the census, the municipality posts all these forms to its local INS office. The data are encoded² on UNIX servers, with an INFORMIX input interface. The data are gathered on a central server at regular intervals so that they can be checked on a PC using SPSS. The final reference file is an SPSS file.

3.3. Checking of data

Preliminary checks

An initial and basically visual check is carried out as soon as the forms are received to ensure that all the required headings have been completed. Farmers are usually contacted by telephone to fill in any missing information. In exceptional cases, the forms may be returned to the municipal authorities if some important headings have been systematically ignored.

Checks of data input

The accuracy of the data encoding is checked by looking at the totals per module in the questionnaire. The encoding checks also cover internal consistency, as well as the headings which must be completed.

Plausibility checks

Data plausibility checks are based on a detailed comparison of each variable with the previous year's results. Any anomalies can usually be detected by studying variations and comparing the minimum and maximum figures for a

² Starting with the 2001 census, all the encoding is done on PCs using Blaise.

given set of forms. The check can be refined by using past data relating to a holding. Suspected errors may be corrected after contacting the holding in question.

3.4. Treatment of non-responses

Since the survey is by law compulsory, the non-response rate is always extremely low. The municipal authorities make every effort to question every farmer in the municipality. If there is any resistance, the INS sends the holding an official letter pointing out the statutory nature of the survey and at the same time tries to make contact by telephone. As a last resort, the Institute's "inspection department" - which can record for legal purposes any refusal to respond - visits the holding and generally manages to obtain the necessary information. The department had to intervene about ten times during the 2000 survey. In the unusual event that a farmer cannot be contacted, it is always possible to use the previous year's data to estimate the figures needed for the survey. This practice had little impact on the results of the 2000 structural survey.

4. PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION

Provisional composite figures covering about 30% of the declarations were published at the end of September 2000. The final file of census data for 2000 was available at the end of February 2001, at the same time as the final composite figures were published. The composite figures were made available to users free of charge on the INS website (<http://statbel.fgov.be>). The printed version provides detailed data of the agricultural census down to provincial level. This publication was available in July 2001. The availability of the census results is independent of the processing of the structural survey of holdings, which is not used in this format by national users.

5. CHANGES TO AGRICULTURAL CENSUS

The agricultural census in Belgium has been radically overhauled since the structural survey of 2000³. In collaboration with the country's main users of these statistics (federal and regional agriculture ministries, trade organisations, universities, etc) the questionnaire has been revised and simplified, while continuing to comply with the requirements of the European survey on the structure of holdings. An electronic questionnaire using Blaise has been offered to the municipal authorities for encoding declarations when farmers are being interviewed. This questionnaire performs an immediate check against the previous year's declaration. It was used by 169 municipalities in 2001 for 28% of declarations. The encoding system for

³ *These changes are part of a broader reform of agricultural statistics with the aim, in particular, of achieving better and faster results and easing the administrative burden on respondents and the statistical workload on the municipalities.*

the printed forms has been moved to Blaise and is done solely on PCs. All these improvements will be applied for future structural surveys.

While the main users of agricultural statistics still want an annual agricultural census, account must also be taken of the political desire to reduce the administrative burden on agricultural holdings. The launch of a debate on the statistical use of data collected for administrative purposes, as well as on the harmonisation of data collections for administrative and statistical purposes, is probably inevitable.