

RESPONSIVENESS OF AGENCIES TO USERS' NEEDS

As an organization, FSUC has received excellent cooperation from Government agencies in the way of keeping us informed of the details and status of current and proposed statistical programs, hearing our unsolicited views on problems or suggestions for improvement, calling on us for our views on statistical problems, and in working with us at our meetings by providing speakers.

FSUC has undertaken a series of 1-day conferences on current and proposed research and statistical programs of various Federal agencies. Thus, far, we have held conferences covering the work of the Office of Business Economics and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. On June 1, we will hold a conference on the research and statistical activities of the Federal Reserve System. Each of these agencies has been most cooperative and responsive in working out the details of the programs and in providing speakers.

These conferences are proving extremely valuable not only in helping our members become better acquainted with the programs of the Federal agencies, but in understanding the problems and difficulties such agencies have in meeting user needs. Also, agency officials find them useful in getting better acquainted with user needs and interests.

Many of our individual members have personal, close contacts with officials in the statistics-producing agencies and by and large have found them more responsive and cooperative with regard to information requests, particularly by the more specialized ones such as the Census Bureau. However, the data users presentation of needs to the Government is usually on an agency basis, and there is, of course, the all-pervasive problem of shortages of resources which, in fact, leaves it with a particular agency to comply or not to comply with a specific request.

Another aspect of the question relates to the extent to which agencies have introduced new, expanded, or improved data in response to users' needs. To accomplish this it must be established that there is sufficient need for the data and that the program will be designed to provide optimum usefulness for a number of purposes. This is one of the criteria for evaluating statistical programs which is spelled out in FSUC's "A Long-Range Program for the Improvement of Federal Statistics." The next factor is the ability of an agency to provide the needed data with its current resources. But more often, it requires additional resources that must be obtained through increased budgets. Accomplishing the latter is probably one of our greatest stumbling blocks.

Thus, satisfying user needs for statistics is a tedious, time-consuming job, and changes are not accomplished overnight. Even after approval and with funds available, the high quality standards set by the statistics-producing agencies, technical difficulties involved in setting up a program, and limited availability of skilled professional staffs combine for a long lag between the time an improvement is accepted and when data are published. A lag of 3 years is close to minimum; a gestation period of 5 years is not uncommon even with persistent efforts like those of our organization. Without continuous pressure, changes in Federal statistics frequently take a decade or more.