

Methodology Note: Removals Survey

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Introduction

The Private Sector Softwood Removals Survey (or removals survey) is an annual survey conducted by Forest Research (on behalf of the Forestry Commission and in association with the Forest Service) of a sample of harvesting companies in the UK. Results from the survey are published in statistical releases produced by the Forestry Commission and are used by a range of others.

The removals survey was reviewed in detail in 2015. The review report is available at

https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/documents/3867/Survey_Review_-_Removals.pdf. The review identified a need to document:

- the methods and processes involved in data collection;
- the editing and imputation performed on the survey; and
- the methods and processes used to ensure confidentiality.

The present note provides this documentation, and complements the information already available on the removals survey, including questionnaires and quality report, at <https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/about-our-statistics/surveys/private-sector-softwood-removals-survey/>.

Documentation on how the results of the removals survey are used in outputs can be found in the Methodology Note: UK Wood Production at <https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/documents/4183/mnukwp.pdf>.

Data collection

Design

The removals survey questionnaires are designed by in-house experts (FC statisticians). They are reviewed annually by in-house and external experts in the subject area, the Expert Group on Timber and Trade Statistics (EGTTS, <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/about-our-statistics/expert-group-on-timber-and-trade-statistics/>), some of whom are also data suppliers. The EGTTS is consulted on proposed changes and all members can suggest changes.

An on-going dialogue between the FC statisticians and the EGTTS via three meetings per year ensures that the data collection procedures remain appropriate from the users' standpoint.

Testing of the visual design, navigational path and functionality of the questionnaire, as well as systems testing was carried out prior to the introduction of the survey. Testing of the web-based questionnaire occurred before its introduction and was undertaken as a small pilot in the first year.

As this is a survey of businesses, the questionnaire is available in English only.

The FC statisticians endeavour to make it easier for respondents to supply data by:

- only asking questions that are strictly necessary;
- offering a choice of collection modes (see below);
- stating that estimates are acceptable;
- providing the name and contact details of a survey liaison point; and
- being willing to negotiate a time extension for return of questionnaires.

Details of the questionnaires used, including the justification for every question asked, can be found at

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/4392/remsurveyq.pdf>.

The distribution list for the removals survey covers the largest timber harvesting companies in the UK, but there are believed to be a large number of businesses harvesting very small amounts of wood that are not covered by the survey.

Modes

Data from the removals survey are collected through paper, e-mail (via Microsoft Word) and online questionnaires. Recipients can complete either paper or web questionnaires, as is most convenient to them, which contributes to improved response rate and quality.

Although the responses to paper questionnaires need to be manually entered into the system, the process is still manageable given the number of responses (around 30), and includes manual quality assurance checks which also need to be performed for web data. Web collection remains the preferred mode from the Forest Research perspective, in terms of ease of collection, cost and minimisation of errors.

The survey timetable is set to allow for unexpected delays. The recipients are given several months to complete the surveys, so there is minimal risk that a major disruption would affect response rates.

Response

Historical response rates for the removals survey are provided in the Sources section of Forestry Statistics, available at <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/forestry-statistics/>.

More detailed response rates for the latest year are available in the removals survey quality report at https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/7626/Removals_quality_report_PI_N8KmN.pdf.

Please note that in the Sources section of Forestry Statistics, nil returns are counted as a response. In the removals survey quality report, nil returns are excluded, following the approach used by the Office for National Statistics.

Weighted response rates are calculated to provide an estimate of the proportion of the total softwood removed from Private Sector woodlands by companies covered by the survey that is accounted for by respondents.

Response bias is mostly linked to business size rather than survey mode, with lower response rates for small businesses.

Data transfer

Online survey data are recorded into an IBM Domino database and exported to Excel before being transferred to SAS, a statistical software package (www.sas.com). Paper returns are entered manually into Excel before being transferred into SAS.

The quality of data transfer is assured by:

- checking that the number of responses received equals the number processed;
- checking the presence of key respondents;
- when potential errors are flagged during data processing, checking them against the original individual returns; and
- some random checking of manual data entry and of electronic transfer from Excel to SAS.

Editing and imputation

Data processing and analysis takes place in SAS and Excel. The processing steps are documented as comments within the SAS code and in the Excel spreadsheets.

Data from the online and paper returns are first combined within SAS, before being merged with historical data. The outputs of interest are calculated and finally exported to Excel.

A number of quality assurance checks, corrections and imputations are carried out at several stages of the data processing and analysis. For large suspected errors or missing data, and for large businesses, the data providers are contacted where possible and asked to check their submission. Failing this, or for minor discrepancies, manual amendments or imputations to record level data are made by the statistics team, mainly based on historical data. Small businesses are not re-contacted due to resource restrictions and in order to limit the burden on data providers. The survey is relatively small, which makes data editing and imputation practical at record-level.

Data entry errors are corrected in the relevant SAS datasets. All other manual corrections are coded within the SAS programs, in order to provide an audit trail.

Editing

Quality assurance checks and associated editing include:

- completeness (missing, duplicate or incomplete records): check against register for large missing respondents, deletion of duplicate records, check against original return for incomplete records;
- consistency within categories (such as breakdowns not adding up): conversion to quantities when percentages have been entered instead of quantities, completion of incomplete breakdowns, unit conversions;
- consistency with historical data (large year-on-year increases/decreases); and
- comparison with other data sources (returns from other respondents).

Respondent errors are relatively rare but, when they do occur, the most common errors in compiling the figures include errors in country breakdowns and use of incorrect units. The wording of the questionnaire has been refined in order to reduce the likelihood of these errors occurring.

Some known common errors are automatically edited, such as country breakdowns not adding up. Of the remaining errors, those with largest impact on estimates are edited manually.

The amount of editing carried out is monitored and reported in the removals survey quality report. On average, less than 5% of responses to individual questions contain errors and require editing.

Imputation

Missing values or records are imputed, mainly based on historical data.

For large non-respondents, expert advice is sought from the EGTTTS on whether major changes are expected compared to previous year data.

When current year data are unavailable and no other information is known, previous year data are rolled forward. If a non-respondent for a given year provides data again in a later year, past imputed data may be corrected by rolling data backward.

Estimation for businesses not covered by the survey

As the survey is known not to cover all businesses that harvest softwood from private sector woodland, an estimate is added to the results from the survey to cover these businesses. At present, these businesses are assumed to account for 15% of the total volume of softwood removals from private sector woodland.

Further information on the current methodology is available in the Methodology Review of Softwood Removals from Non-FC/ FS Woodland at https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/3538/rem_methodology_rev2011-12.pdf.

Disclosure

The removals survey is voluntary and, to encourage higher response rates, the Forestry Commission/ Forest Research assures respondents that their returns will be treated in confidence and aggregated with data from others so that it will not be possible to identify an individual respondent in any publication.

In order to ensure that respondents' data remain confidential, breakdowns to be published are checked to ensure that each figure to be published represents at least 3 respondents and that no individual business accounts for too large a proportion of the figure.

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Glossary

Bioenergy

Energy from any fuel that is derived from biomass.

Biomass

Material that is derived from living, or recently living, biological organisms.

Forest Service (FS)

The agency of the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs responsible for forestry matters in Northern Ireland.

Forestry Commission (FC)

The government department responsible for forestry matters in England, Scotland and (until March 2013) Wales. The Forestry Commission's functions in Wales transferred to a new organisation, Natural Resources Wales, on 1 April 2013. The responsibility for forestry is devolved.

Great Britain (GB)

England, Wales and Scotland.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW)

The organisation responsible for advising the Welsh Government on the environment, created on 1 April 2013. NRW is responsible for the functions previously carried out by the Environment Agency in Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales and Forestry Commission Wales.

Roundwood

Trunk or branch wood, generally with a top diameter of 7 cm or more. Can be in the form of logs (14 cm top diameter or more) or small roundwood (7 to 14 cm).

Softwood

The wood of coniferous trees, such as spruce, pine and larch; a term sometimes used for the coniferous trees themselves.

United Kingdom (UK)

Great Britain and Northern Ireland.