



AEA Committee on Economic Statistics

Opportunities to Comment on Proposed Federal Data Collections: A Primer on How to Respond

Introduction

Economic data are the lifeblood of AEA members. Economists' capacity to produce meaningful, reproducible, impactful analyses is very much a function of their access to current, reliable, detailed data. The most important source of research data is the Federal government, particularly its economic statistical agencies—including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

In the 1970s, Congress became concerned that U.S. households and businesses were being unnecessarily burdened by an uncoordinated array of survey instruments from multiple Federal agencies. In response, Congress passed the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), which requires every Federal data collection to be cleared by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before implementation. The PRA lays out the steps and timelines for a process by which a Federal agency is to submit an "Information Collect Request" (ICR) to OMB, including two successive opportunities for public comment.

In the experience of AEA's Committee on Economic Statistics (AEASat), focused, thoughtful, actionable comments on ICRs from AEA members can lead to better data, improved access, greater research opportunities, and more robust studies. To these ends, AEASat provides this primer on the why, what, and how of public comment on proposed Federal data collections in the hope that it will motivate AEA members to inform statistical agencies and OMB about their views of current and proposed data collections and how these might be improved.

Why: Reasons to Provide Comments

Essentially, ICR comments are a means to address "information market failure" in the realm of economic statistics. More specifically, comments can:

- Increase Federal agency and OMB understanding of the uses and value of the data collection
- Prompt a Federal agency to improve sample design, the data collection instrument, collection methodology, or analytic approach
- Create avenues for a Federal agency to periodically consult with AEA members on contemplated revisions and adjustments

The ICR comment process is non-political. It is intended to be "market-perfecting" through enabling the "sellers" and "buyers" of Federal statistics to have a more full and common

understanding of the desired characteristics of the “product” and the return on Federal investment.

In terms of personal cost-benefit, AEASat’s experience is that a relatively small investment of personal time and effort can yield substantial results for one’s research, the field more broadly, and public policy.

What: The Nature of the ICR Process

To implement a data collection, a Federal agency must first submit an ICR to OMB and then receive approval as described in “terms of clearance.” Each ICR includes data collection instrument(s), form letters to respondents, and a detailed Supporting Statement in two parts. (Part A addresses Justification. Part B describes Collection of Information Employing Statistical Methods.)

OMB clearance of a Federal data collection is time-limited, typically for three years. Any substantive changes in a collection during the three-year period must be cleared by OMB.

The ICR process has two major steps, each with an opportunity for public comment:

- First, the agency announces in a *Federal Register* notice that it intends to submit an ICR to OMB and gives the public 60 days to provide it with comments on the draft ICR (particularly the data collection instrument and the Supporting Statement).
- After considering public comments, the agency prepares the ICR for formal submission to OMB.
 - The agency announces its submission in a second *Federal Register* notice and gives the public 30 days to provide comments to OMB.
 - OMB posts the full ICR, with all attachments, in the [Information Collection Review](#) section of its Reginfo.gov website.
 - The ICR includes a response to each letter received in the first comment period.
 - The ICR is assigned to the OMB desk officer for submitting agency. The OMB desk officer aims to publish a decision within 30 days of the close of the public comment period.

At a minimum, then, an agency must issue its first *Federal Register* notice 120 days before the expiration of the current clearance. Most agencies issue their first notice well in advance of the 120-day mark, often in the range of 150-180 days.

How: Guidance on Preparing Comments

AEA members are encouraged to comment on any aspect of the proposed data collection of interest or concern. Topics might include, for instance, needs and uses, methodology, survey design, cost, schedule, and consultation with data users.

Comment letters may be of any length or format. AEASat recommends that commenters use institutional letterhead when possible.

AEA members can consider framing their comments in any number of ways, such as:

- assessments – identifying what they do and do not like and support
- suggestions – for how the Federal agency might proceed in this or future collections

- requests – for example, for a change in the design of the survey instrument, to be consulted in the future, to carry out research on an alternative approach
- observations – for example, implications of the sample size for statistical reliability

When writing to OMB, AEA members may consider proposing a specific “term of clearance.” For instance, a member could suggest that, as a term of clearance, OMB direct the Census Bureau to test the efficacy of an alternative set of questions and report back to OMB in a year on the results.

Andrew Reamer, Professor at George Washington University and contract staff to AEASat, is available to provide AEA members with information on the comment process and advice, and feedback on draft comments. Prof. Reamer is a member of advisory committees of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of Economic Analysis and has had been successful in submitting comments that OMB uses to frame its terms of clearance. He is available at areamer@gwu.edu and (202) 994-7866.

Conclusion

Economists work in an intense market environment in which they are rigorously judged by contribution and quality of their research. Improvements in the availability and accessibility of Federal statistics would enable economists to better thrive and prosper. To that end, AEASat strongly encourages AEA members to submit thoughtful, focused comments on Federal data collections in their realms of expertise.