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DUPLICATION OF DATA COLLECTION FROM COUNTRIES

Comments by the Commissioner of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics

August 17, 2001

MEMORANDUM FOR: KATHERINE K. WALLMAN
Chief Statistician
Office of Management and Budget

FROM : KATHARINE G. ABRAHAM
Commissioner

SUBJECT : Duplicative Requests from International
Organizations

This is in reply to the May 29 e-mail on your behalf from Suzann Evinger concerning duplicative requests for information from international organizations.

Three international organizations regularly send major requests for similar employment and unemployment data to the BLS. The three organizations are the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Labor Office (ILO), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Some requests from these organizations are regular and substantial annual inquiries, while others are special requests on an ad hoc basis. The annual inquiries are somewhat duplicative, while the ad hoc requests are not. In addition to the annual inquiries, the OECD and the ILO also obtain quarterly and monthly data from the BLS on a regular basis. These latter data collections, although somewhat duplicative, are not discussed below because either our staff has set up automated systems to supply the data or the requesting organization obtains the data directly from the BLS web site. A few other international organizations, such as the Economic Commission for Europe, also request BLS data, but these requests generally are quite limited in nature and are not particularly burdensome.

Advances in technology in recent years have done a great deal to reduce the labor input required to respond to the growing volume of requests for BLS data from international organizations. This means that duplication imposes a less serious burden on the BLS today than in the past. Responding to the OECD, ILO, and APEC annual questionnaires is still somewhat labor intensive, however, partly because we have not automated some of the reporting processes and partly because these questionnaires may be added to or otherwise changed from year to year.

Below I discuss the annual requests of the OECD, ILO, and APEC where duplication occurs. I include comments about the implications for duplication of the launching of other regional databases besides the APEC initiative. At the end, I provide some remarks about the scope for harmonizing the various questionnaires.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

The OECD's "Annual Questionnaire for Labor Force Statistics" requires updates and revisions for labor force, employment, and unemployment data, including breakdowns by age and sex. Employment also is broken down by major industry groupings that must be compiled by the BLS staff to conform to the groupings requested by the OECD. Employment data from both the labor force survey and the establishment survey are requested. In recent years, the OECD added requests for data on duration of unemployment, part-time employment, and discouraged workers. We have not automated our response system because the questionnaires are filled out only once a year, and they change from time to time. Replies to the OECD inquiries generally are returned via e-mail.

International Labor Office

The ILO's "Annual Questionnaires for the Yearbook of Labor Statistics" are wider in scope than the OECD's annual labor force inquiry; the ILO questionnaires cover the main labor force variables as well as prices, wages, hours, strikes and lockouts, and occupational injuries. The labor force

variables in the ILO inquiry, however, are similar to those of the OECD's inquiry, except that the ILO's definitions of industries are somewhat different, and the ILO also requests employment data by occupational classifications. Replies to the ILO inquiries generally are mailed back on paper questionnaires. We understand that the ILO is moving toward electronic questionnaires that could be answered via their web site.

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

The APEC's annual requests to the BLS have been far more extensive and detailed than those of the OECD and the ILO. The APEC presents the data of member countries on a Labor Market Information web site. The APEC requests duplicate, to a large degree, the ILO Yearbook questionnaires, but they also go beyond them to request very detailed occupational and industry employment data that are cross classified (i.e, occupation by industry) and even more detailed age groupings (5 year intervals). We have not automated our response system because the APEC requests are relatively new, annual, and subject to change.

At the outset of the APEC project in 1996, the Bureau's staff expressed concern that the reporting burden on countries would be huge, and that there was a large potential for duplication of reporting with other international agencies. One BLS official noted wryly that we would have to back a truck up to BLS in order to transport the printouts required to meet the request. Members of the BLS staff met with APEC officials during their two visits to the Bureau, and our staff suggested that the APEC obtain most of the U.S. data themselves via LABSTAT (our online database) rather than expecting the Bureau to fill out the APEC questionnaires. The APEC personnel were unsuccessful, for reasons unknown to us, in obtaining the data online, even with offers of considerable assistance from the BLS.

In the past few years, we decided to fulfill partially the APEC requests for updates by supplying copies of all the questionnaires we prepare for the ILO each year. Other

parts of the request, which do not involve duplication with other organizations, require some fairly extensive data entry by the BLS staff in response to pleadings on the APEC's behalf by their correspondent in the Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs.

I mention the fairly burdensome portion of the APEC requests because the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD) may wish to consider the possibility that there may be initiatives to launch similar regional economic bloc databases in the future. Such requests could add to the duplicative reporting burdens on certain national statistical offices. Perhaps UNSD could be an advocate for more data sharing across international organizations in place of the initiation of new databases.

Scope for Harmonization

Data requests by international organizations are duplicative, to some extent, but the replies are customized to the demands of each organization in terms of both content and time schedules. Thus, as the situation stands, the BLS cannot send the questionnaires we have prepared for the OECD to the ILO or vice versa. Although the Bureau sends the ILO questionnaires to the APEC, this does not satisfy completely the APEC requests. Fundamental changes would have to be made to harmonize the data demands of these organizations if one questionnaire were to satisfy the needs of all organizations.