

SoE in an international context

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Background

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommended in 1979 that member countries intensify their efforts to improve scientific knowledge, information, statistics and indicators: on the state of the environment in order to contribute to the evaluation of the state of the environment; and of activities that have an impact on the environment and of environmental policies themselves. The OECD also recommended that member countries prepare periodic national reports on the state of the environment and its changes over time. A number of OECD countries have given effect to this recommendation.

This paper summarises SoE reporting in some OECD countries with information gathered at the OECD Working Group on Environmental Information and Outlooks meeting in December 2005 and subsequently confirmed by member countries. The report does not summarise the history of SoE reporting but does provide a snapshot of current best practices. Further information can be gained by accessing the relevant web sites for the member countries.

There is a diversity of SoE reporting practices within the OECD member countries who contributed information to this report. The diversity reflects the institutional arrangements for SoE reporting within member countries, the different legislative or policy requirements of the countries, and whether the countries have a devolved system of SoE reporting.

Australia's State of the Environment (SoE) reporting has elements in common with other OECD member countries, in particular, the legal basis for environmental reporting and assessment, the regular reporting, the trend to placing the material on the internet for accessibility as well as producing a hard copy report, making the underlying data accessible on the internet and preparing SoE information products for different audiences.

Legal basis for SoE reporting

Several OECD member countries have a legal basis for environmental reporting and assessment (for example, Canada, Mexico, Austria, Japan, Germany and the Netherlands). European Union countries operate under EU common environmental legislation that includes statutes of information gathering.

Finland has a general obligation to gather and disseminate information, while some OECD member countries such as Norway and Sweden have no specific legal basis for reporting and assessment. Since 1986 Italy's Ministry of Environment has been obliged to present to the Parliament a two-yearly SoE report. Specific legislation does not yet exist in Spain but is in preparation. The Spanish National Statistics Plan includes several statistical operations on environment and sustainable development that are the official basis for SoE regular reporting.

Australia has had a legislative mandate for SoE reporting since the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 1999 came into force in 2000, and has adopted the practice of having the five-yearly SoE Report prepared by an independent committee appointed by the Minister for the Environment and Heritage.

Regular SoE reporting

Some OECD member countries have been preparing SoE reports for a number of years:

- Japan has been producing an annual report since 1972,
- the German SoE report "Daten zur Umwelt" (Facts and Figures on the Environment) has been published every four years since 1997
- Mexico has been producing SoE reports every two years since 1986.
- Spain has produced an annual report on the environment since 1984. Since 2005, Spain has published the 'Environmental Profile of Spain' and 'Sustainability in Spain.'
- Switzerland has prepared a SoE report every 3–5 years since 1990, and since 1997 it has been a joint work between the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the Federal Office of Environment.

Some countries prepare a SoE report at regular intervals:

- Canada used to prepare full SoE reports every 5 years but smaller indicator-based reports are now produced regularly, every 2–3 years.
- Denmark prepares a report every four years (the latest report published in September 2005)

- the Flanders region of Belgium prepares a state of nature and biodiversity report every two years
- Finland's report on Natural Resources and the Environment is published in connection with the state Budget each year
- The Spanish Statistical Office (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) regularly publishes several statistics from six environmental surveys and a system of environmental accounts
- Korea publishes an Environmental White Paper annually and the Environmental Statistics Yearbook is published separately as well
- The United States Environmental Protection Agency prepared their first SoE Report in 2003 with a second report planned for 2007
- The Italian Ministry of Environment, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Statistic Institute) and Agenzia per la Protezione dell'Ambiente e per i Servizi Tecnici (National Environment Protection Agency and Technical Services) provide regular reports and Environmental Databooks.

Some countries do not prepare a single SoE report as environmental reporting functions are split among a number of agencies. For example in the United Kingdom, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs produce *Environment in Your Pocket* which is a distillation of key environmental statistics ,based on the UK's sustainability indicators while the Environment Agency prepared their national SoE report in 2005. The report is an overview of the state of the environment in England and Wales and is issues-based.

Themes or issues-based SoE reporting

Some SoE reports are theme-based such as Australia's, while other reports are issues-based such as Japan's. Canada's reporting is a hybrid between theme-based (for example, air, water, soil) and issue-based (for example, acid rain, toxic substances, climate change).

France publishes regular sectoral reports including agriculture and the environment. The Flanders region of Belgium produces yearly indicator reports with thematic studies of the state of the environment. The Danish Ministry of Environment has since the early 1990s published a yearly report and in 2002 introduced reporting on a thematic basis. The theme of the 2005 SoE publication was Nature in Denmark.

Several SoE reports are based on a set of environmental or sustainability indicators:

- Canada's 2003 Environmental Signals report covered 13 issues using 56 indicators
- Italy's "Environmental Data Yearbook" describes the environmental state and trends in the country using 230 indicators. "Environmental Statistics" reports issues and themes

use over 70 urban environmental indicators and the SoE report of the Italian Ministry of the Environment reports sectoral issues.

- Mexico produces both a theme based SoE report and an environmental performance indicators report with nearly 140 indicators.
- Norway also reports against strategic objectives for eight priority areas
- Spain published a report in 2005 based on indicators of transport and the environment that is planned to be an annual publication, as well as a similar one on energy and environment.

Sweden reports annually on progress to meet interim targets set by the Swedish Parliament for 16 national environmental quality objectives. Austria is intending to report against a system of environmental quality objectives in the future.

Canada prepared a State of the Great Lakes Report in 2005 in collaboration with the United State Environmental Protection Agency and has prepared a State of Freshwater Ecosystems Report in selected Canadian watersheds.

Publishing options

The communication of environmental data and information is important for all OECD member countries and many have tailored publications to particular audiences:

- Finland has changed from producing a hard copy report to producing a CD-ROM and will publish on the internet
- France's next SoE Report in 2006 will comprise a large hard copy report
- Mexico's 2005 report is also large and hard copy, is available on a CD-ROM and on the internet with a summary report to be prepared
- Japan prepares a summary version of their SoE Report
- Italy has prepared four different versions of their Environmental Data Yearbook for different audiences. The 2006 Italian SoE report is available on internet.
- Norway uses the internet for report publication
- the United States is developing an electronic report on the environment for the 2007 report
- Germany has operated a continually updated internet site ("Umweltdaten Deutschland Online") providing SoE information since 2003

- Switzerland also publishes on the internet, as well as a hard copy version
- Spain has publications available in hard copy with a CD-ROM included, as well as on the internet

Data accessibility

Several OECD member countries have data and information accessible via their websites:

- data for the Netherlands Environmental Data Compendium is updated on their website
- Canada is intending to update data for indicators as it becomes available, especially for freshwater quality, air quality and greenhouse gas emissions
- Sweden updates data and information at the Environmental Objectives Portal for their environmental quality indicators as new information comes to hand
- Switzerland publishes on line indicators systems on environment and sustainable development which are regularly updated
- Mexico's environmental database is available on the internet and is updated constantly. It is also linked to an indicators module which updates automatically as the database is updated. This database is the basis for the electronic and paper publications of the SoE reports, Indicators reports and Environmental Data Compendium.
- Italy has made the National Environment Protection Agency and Technical Services database for the Environmental Data Yearbook available to the public on their website . The database can be updated on-line by the 200 experts from the agency and externally by those who contribute data and information. National Statistic Institute's "Environmental Statistics" and "Urban Environmental Indicators" are available on the internet.