

RE: DATA RELEASE GUIDELINES
Updated March 4, 2015

Periodic requests for data on active projects (not yet published) highlight the need for data release guidelines. We need to have a process in place that everyone understands and applies consistently. Many areas of New Mexico, or beyond, have the potential of future litigation where legal or administrative decisions may be influenced by our results or reports. In general, the rule follows that “if it’s not posted, it’s not publicly available.”

Proprietary information

No personal names or any other proprietary information should ever be released as part of a data sharing agreement, unless it is explicitly agreed upon in writing with that person, entity or agency. This includes but is not limited to addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, or first and last names. Point locations derived from GPS, topo maps, or other devices should be labeled with an identification number/code that does not associate it with personal information.

Here are some guidelines for data release:

Informal data sharing. As researchers, we have the discretion to share any data we collect with collaborating scientists. In most cases, there are no restrictions (except for proprietary data), and the decision is ours. For example, this might be another mapper or hydrologist conducting similar research, collecting similar data in the same geographic area with whom we have a working relationship, and whom we trust not to misuse or scoop our work. It is important to make it clear to any collaborating scientist that the shared data are preliminary, for internal use only, and not to be released to either the public or other scientists. These guidelines will ensure a free exchange of ideas, data, and interpretations with a non-Bureau colleague, while protecting inappropriate use of the data.

Formal data sharing agreements. Sometimes we have more formal data sharing agreements with federal, state, or local governmental entities. These should be through written MOUs. Any restrictions that apply are those that we have agreed upon with that agency. Raw or provisional data are suitable for sharing, in any form, as long as the receiver understands what they are getting and agrees to any limitations that we require on its use or release.

Public requests for information. Any data released to the public or non-collaborating scientists should meet two primary guidelines: (1) Data should be equally accessible and available to all members of the public; and (2) have undergone sufficient review and QA/QC that researchers are comfortable that the data are correct and not going to change.

1) For public requests, the first guideline is best met through a process of open-file report and web posting. An open-file report provides a mechanism for users to cite the report, data, idea, or interpretation, and for readers to easily locate, view, and download. Open-file reports are, by their very nature, provisional. While ideas and interpretations might change as research progresses, data should not.

2) The second guideline requires some professional discretion and judgment. The data should be posted and released only when the researcher is confident that they are correct and will not change. We are not under any obligation to release data that have not been made publicly available, or have not undergone an adequate level of review. It is recommended that any open file report or data to be posted on the bureau web page has undergone an internal review by a science staff member who is not a principal author (first or second), and has been revised in response to comments.