History of Survey Program

Congress provided the initial funding for the survey in fiscal year 1991. At that time, the U.S. Census Bureau developed and conducted a feasibility survey to collect 1991 data from a sample of approximately 4,400 nonfarm companies. The purpose was to test the clarity of questions and instructions, and to determine the ability of companies to report the requested data. The Bureau selected a sample of 11,200 nonfarm companies in 1992. While primarily used to evaluate content, form and instructions, selected results were published in May of 1994.

After evaluating the 1992 survey results, it was determined that the annual collection of detailed expenditures on the types of structures and equipment purchased was overly burdensome. A cycle of differing collections was developed to repeat every 5 years. The 5-year cycle included conducting annually a basic survey that collects total capital expenditures for new and used structures and equipment from companies with five employees or more and biannually a survey of companies with fewer than five employees, including those with no employees. Collection of detailed information on types of structures and equipment would occur once during the 5-year cycle with structures information collected in 1994 and equipment in 1996.

A proposal to revise this plan was approved by the Office of Management and Budget beginning with the 1996 survey. The new plan included a mail sample of all small companies annually to provide an improved time series estimate of total and new capital expenditures by all companies. Additionally, detailed information on types of structures and equipment would be collected in the 1998 survey from companies with employees and every 5 years thereafter or as determined by the 1998 survey results. This pattern continued with detail information collected in the 2003 and 2008 reference years. In 2012, the detailed information was collected a year early to coincide with the 2012 Economic Census. This new pattern continued with the expanded collection of 2017 data to coincide with data collected from the 2017 Economic Census.