

7 CASE STUDY: COMMONWEALTH CUSTODIANSHIP GUIDELINES, AUSTRALIA

Australia has formed the Commonwealth Spatial Data Committee (CSDC) as the peak coordinating body (network hub) for spatial data management at the national level. It consists of senior governmental representatives. One of its tasks has been to draft the *Commonwealth Custodianship Guidelines setting out the Rights and Responsibilities of Spatial Data Custodians and Lead Agencies* (<http://www.auslig.gov.au/pipc/csdc/csdcguid.htm>), the executive summary of which notes:

“The principle of custodianship should be applied . . . as a matter of good practice, convention and convenience. It is simply the only way that data can be managed in an orderly fashion . . .

The identification of custodians and the effective operation of custodianship are necessary for the successful management of government spatial data...

To help improve [the management of . . . spatial data] the Committee will implement a system of lead agencies and custodians of Commonwealth spatial data, and outline their rights and responsibilities . . .

These guidelines are designed to assist lead agencies and data custodians in developing improved practice in spatial data management . . .

A lead agency will be responsible for government-wide coordination of a data class or category. This includes development of standards, and coordination of data acquisition so as to avoid duplication. The CSDC will provide policy guidance and oversee the lead agency system. Lead agencies will be identified for broad categories of data after negotiation within CSDC . . .

CSDC will maintain a register of spatial data custodians. The Register will define the custodian agency or agencies and data category, data items, geographic coverage and any other feature necessary to define the dataset . . .”

The *Guidelines* discuss the distinction between lead agencies and custodians, noting that the responsibilities of a lead agency are primarily those of policy-development and coordination, and detailing a set of specific objectives for cooperation. Clearly, in this example, lead agencies correspond to network hubs for the thematic areas in

which they have expertise. The CSDC itself corresponds to an over-arching hub seeking to coordinate the efforts of lead agencies.

The custodian of a dataset is described as ‘the nominated body, or person responsible for the development and/or the management of that dataset, and who has the right to determine the conditions on which those data may be used or released’. The *Guidelines* stress that:

“All spatial data collected . . . forms part of the . . . corporate spatial data resource. Individual agencies involved in the management of the spatial data act as custodians on behalf of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Government delegates operational responsibility for the data, and for implementing Commonwealth policy with regard to it, but retains the ultimate responsibility for the data.

Custodianship is not necessarily synonymous with ownership of either the data nor the copyright of that data.”

Among the benefits of custodianship, the *Guidelines* note that improved coordination assists in the avoidance of duplication of effort and the unnecessary costs which this causes, thus achieving greater benefits from the investments in data development which are made. The assignment of custodianship is recognised as being a complex process, requiring formal negotiation and documentation of the outcome. A list of essential datasets, together with suggested lead agencies and possible custodians is located at <http://www.auslig.gov.au/pipc/csdccust.htm>.

Lead agencies are highlighted as a mechanism to facilitate higher-level coordination of data themes, including developing broad initiatives, future projects and agreement of standards. Each identified lead agency is responsible for disseminating information about its category of data, particularly to potential users, and for promoting access to the data. This includes seeking to remove impediments to and improving the efficiency of data transactions.

A major role of the lead agency is to avoid duplication of effort in data collection, by providing avenues for communication between the network’s partners and mechanisms to identify and coordinate data collection activities. However, the lead agency is not empowered to determine priorities for data acquisition; that is the right of the custodians.

The *Guidelines* further note that standards for recording and managing data need to be considered, both by lead agencies and custodians. In particular, standard methods for selecting features and attributes, for assigning meanings and values, for ensuring data quality, and for regulating data transfer are noted. Indeed, it is recommended that custodians seek compliance with established quality management standards in order to ensure the quality of their datasets.

In this example from Australia, custodians are entitled to levy a charge for access to their data. The amount charged depends on several factors, including Government charging directives, the costs of collecting, storing and distributing the data, market rates, the intended uses of the data, and the conditions of any pre-negotiated arrangements.

More information about the Commonwealth Spatial Data Committee (CSDC) can be obtained from <http://www.auslig.gov.au/pipc/csdc/csdcmmain.htm>. Details of the policy governing data transactions is available at <http://www.auslig.gov.au/pipc/csdc/csdcstdti.htm>.