



## Crunching the Numbers

By Jack Hart

These days lots of our sources grind out prodigious quantities of numbers. They apply dozens of different measures to their activities, and then fill news releases with the endless columns of figures that result. But the numbers themselves seldom mean much. Interpreting the numbers to find the news is our responsibility.

Simply passing all those numbers along to readers is no better than uncritically passing along any kind of press-release information. Such practices undercut our standing as tough-minded, independent sources of information.

They also damage our readability. Nothing kills reader interest quicker than an apparently endless stream of numbers. Our job is to intercept the deluge of statistics spewing out of publicists, trade organizations and governments. We should screen those figures, sifting out the dross and reducing what remains to the most meaningful, newsworthy numbers.

We failed to do that in the following examples:

- The number of new single-family building permits slipped slightly in January, to 117, with a total valuation of \$10.7 million, compared with 170 permits with a valuation of \$15.5 million issued in January 1990.  
For the year, the county issued a total of 2,480 single-family permits, compared with 1,812 in 1989. Multi-family permits showed a much more modest increase -- 1,062 compared with 1,036 the previous year.  
Residential sales, though, jumped 21.3 percent, from 4,683 in 1989, to 5,679 last year, according to Benchmarks, a Vancouver appraisal service that tallies real estate transactions.  
The total volume of those sales showed an even greater gain, from nearly \$374.6 million in 1989 to more than \$531.8 million last year -- an increase of almost 42 percent.  
The Multiple Listing Service of Clark County reported it had a total of 2,467 active listings as of Feb. 15, of which 595 were existing homes and 386 were new houses. Alicia Leeb, systems coordinator for the service, said scores of new listings were coming in weekly as

interest rates have come down.

The listing service showed 586 homes had been sold during the preceeding six months -- an average of more than three a day. The average selling price was \$86,354, and the average time on the market was 60 days.

- The U.S. Agriculture Department estimates farmers nationwide will ship more than 35 million trees this season, up from the previous high of 34.3 million trees sold in 1988. The volume has increased by as much as 2.5 percent annually for the past 15 years, at least twice the growth rate of the U.S. population.

In Oregon, the No. 1 producing state, thousands of workers last week began to cut, pack and ship a crop estimated at 7.5 million trees, up nearly 5 percent from 7.2 million in 1988, said Bryan Ostlund, executive secretary of \* the Northwest Christmas Tree Association.

Michigan, No. 2 in volume, will harvest 6.5 million; Wisconsin, 4.8 million; and Washington, 3.5 million. The biggest market for Oregon trees is California.

Prices haven't changed much since last year.

Farmers are receiving \$7 to \$11 from wholesale buyers for each top-grade Douglas fir, 6 to 7 feet tall, compared with \$8 to \$11 last year, Ostlund reported. The price varies by quantity and quality, he explained, and some smaller growers lacking a strong relationship with a buyer are getting \$1 less this season.

The same tree will retail for an average of \$15 to \$21, he said, compared with \$16 to \$21 in 1988. The tree may sell for \$12 to \$18 at a cut-it-yourself farm.

Wholesale buyers are paying \$13 to \$19 for the same size and grade of noble fir.

Consumers will pay \$24 to \$35 at a retail lot, or \$17 to \$27 at a you-cut farm, also little or no change from 1988.

- In 1986, for example, Americans built an estimated 19,000 log houses worth in excess of \$2 billion. More than 84 percent of them were earmarked as primary residences, according to Log Homes magazine's 1988 log-homes buyers guide published in December.

The popularity of log homes was revived in the 1970s, spurred first by a renewed awareness of the environment by those who were seeking an alternative lifestyle and later fueled by a growing acceptance of factory-built log-home kits for do-it-yourselfers. Today, the log-home industry is booming, with an estimated 350 log-home manufacturing companies and custom builders carving out a significant niche in the market. Of the 371,000 custom-built, single-family homes that the government says were built in 1986 in the United States, more than 5 percent of them were log homes, according to industry figures.

The average size of a log home built in 1986 in the United States was 1,873 square feet, with 44 percent of the owners surveyed by Log Homes magazine reporting that their homes cost more than \$70,000 to complete, excluding land.

In terms of log-home production in 1986, Oregon ranked 12th, with 584 units built for a

3.03 percent share of the overall log-homes market. However, only 317 of those homes remained in the state, which ranked Oregon 25th in log-home construction.

By comparison, the state of Washington ranked fifth in log-home production, with a total of 1,018 units produced in 1986, and was 16th in log-home construction, with 447 units built in that state in '86.

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