National Census of Ferry Operators (NCFO) FAQs

1. **What is the National Census of Ferry Operators database?**

   The National Census of Ferry Operators database is a collection of summary tables that provide ferry operation data from a nationwide census of ferry operators along with other sources of ferry data such as the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Numerous detailed data elements describing the services provided by these ferry operators were collected as part of this effort. A relational database format was utilized throughout the collection and processing of the many related data elements, and provides for the reporting of the information at various levels, such as by operator, route segment, terminal, or vessel.

2. **What is the geographic scope of the NCFO database?**

   The database of existing ferry operations includes the United States and its possessions, encompassing the 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In addition to ferry operators providing domestic service within the U.S. and its possessions, operators providing services to or from at least one U.S. terminal are also included.

3. **What types of operations are included in the NCFO?**

   Ferry types of operations that are included within the scope of the census are those providing itinerant, fixed route, common carrier passenger and/or vehicle roll-on, roll-off (RoRo) ferry service as well as railroad car float operations. The census also includes ferry or water taxi operations that have fixed routes between two or more different ports of call, ferry or water taxi operations that provide service on a fixed schedule or on demand within a fixed window of time, common carriers (e.g. for-hire carriers) who serve the general public at reasonable rates and without discrimination, and railroad car float operations that utilize a tug and barge combination having two to three parallel tracks, onto which rail cars are rolled for transit across a body of water.

   The NCFO does not include non-itinerant ferry operations (e.g., “cruise-to-nowhere” services), excursion services (e.g., whale watches, casino boats, day/dinner cruises, etc.), passenger only water taxi services not operating on a fixed route, LoLo (Lift-on/Lift-off) freight/auto carrier services, or long distance passenger only cruise ship services.

4. **How is the NCFO database produced and maintained?**

   The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) has adopted a number of methods to maximize the validity and reliability of the census data. Cognitive interviews are conducted to evaluate the content, structure and layout of the census questionnaire any time changes are made. Beginning with the 2010 census, BTS was begun using an electronic (i.e., online) questionnaire for all data entry. This reduces the number of data entry errors and limits the types of responses to only valid values. A set of rules for coding and entering paper

questionnaires using the online tool was developed to further reduce the number of data entry errors. Once the data entry is complete, external data sources (e.g., USGC, Army Core and Census data), are used to update data fields not collected from the operators themselves. The final step before publishing NCFO data is cleaning out fields that operators have indicated are business sensitive.

5. How is the NCFO data disseminated?

The NCFO data is updated biennially (i.e., every two years). The data becomes available approximately six months after the end of the data are collection period. This time allows for receipt of the data from the operators as well as BTS quality assurance and validation. Data are disseminated to customers via the online query tool at http://www.bts.gov/, upon request, and in annual summary tables. Customers can request NCFO data by contacting BTS Information Services (by email at RITAInfo@dot.gov or by phone at 800-853-1351).

6. What are the main features of the online query interface?

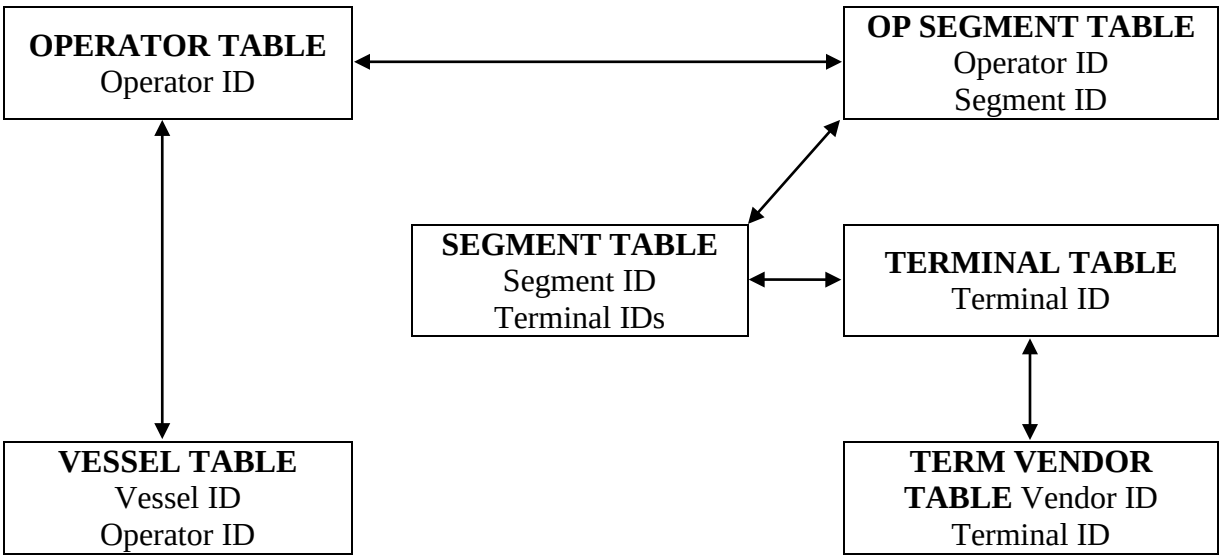
The major and distinctive feature of the online query tool is that it allows users to target specific elements of a data table or tables rather than having to download the entire table. When a reference table is added to a data query, the data pulled from the reference table will be only from the cases related to those parameters specified in your query rather than the entire data file. In other words, all retrieved information is related to each other, integrated seamlessly, and presented to users by the tool. For example, once Terminal table is selected, the query tool can find segments connected to the terminals from the Segment table, operators related to the terminal through the OPERATOR_SEGMENT TABLE, and so on.

7. How do I download data to my computer?

Any data table can be downloaded to your computer by selecting the table in step one. If all the data from that table is desired, simply select "All" in steps 3 and 4 to specify the entire table. The data can then be downloaded first clicking View Data, and then selecting Download CSV Data or XML data depending on the format you desire. If you would like to download the entire database, Select All Tables from step one followed by the steps just described. Keep in mind that larger data queries will take longer to process and download.

8. How do I merge downloaded data files into a single flat file?

The diagram below outlines the links between the various data tables. The tables can be merged using the unique IDs corresponding to the tables to be merged. For example, the operator segment table can be linked to the operator table based on the operator ID which exists in both tables. To link the terminal table to the operator table however, the operator segment and segment tables need to be merged to the operator table in sequence. The data query tool will do this for you if you only need to tables to be merged. Thus merging the entire database into one flat file is a multistep process. In the future, BTS will provide SAS and SPSS syntax for merging the entire database. Once created, these syntax files will be made available on the NCFO home page.



9. How do I trend passenger boarding data from 2010 and beyond with previous years?

Beginning with the 2010 NCFO, ferry routes were split into their individual route segments. A route from terminal A to terminal B to Terminal C, was listed as one segment from A to C in previous years. Beginning in 2010 this route was listed as four separate route segments (i.e., A to B, B to C, C to B, and B to A). In order to be able to generate this level of detail, it was necessary in some cases to edit the data to represent the boardings, etc for return trips (i.e., when it was not already split out by the operator). Thus when a single route segment (i.e., A to B) need to be split (i.e., A to B and B to A), the following editing rules were employed:

- reported boarding numbers were split in half for routes with no destination (e.g., those connecting two sides of a highway across a river), thus 50% of the boardings were assigned to segment A-B and 50% to segment B-A;
- reported boarding numbers were left intact for routes with a destination for which there was no other way to return to the mainland (e.g., those delivering passengers to an island whereby they had to take the return trip to leave the island), thus 100% of the boardings were assigned to segment A-B and 100% to segment B-A.

  It is important to take these rules into consideration when trying to make comparisons to previous years. Ultimately, BTS would like to discourage such comparisons.

10. How can I divide one XML file into several individual files if multiple data tables are queried?

Currently the download file for XML format is merged into one file if you selected multiple data tables (Terminal and Segment were selected as example), then you can view the XML file with a notepad or Word. Each table is marked by the declaration within the < and > symbols. The following provides an example:

<Terminals>
<Terminal>
DATA ELEMENT (All in UPPER CASE within Start or End tags)
</Terminal>
<Terminal>
DATA ELEMENT (All in UPPER CASE within Start or End tags)
</Terminal>
</Terminals>
<Segments>

DATA ELEMENTS (All in UPPER CASE within Start or End tags)

DATA ELEMENTS (All in UPPER CASE within Start or End tags)

</Segments>

You can separate one file into two files by copying the portion of text for each file and pasting them into new files. You must remember to include the XML declaration (<?xml version="1.0" ?>) for each file, you can save files with different name with extension of .xml.

11. Why do I get a pop up window when I try to view the results of my query?

If no selections made for Steps 3 or 4 a pop-up window will notify you which necessary item(s) need(s) to be selected. You can return to the interface and make selections after you click "ok" button.

12. Why are the selection boxes in steps 3 and 4 empty?

If no items are shown in Step 3 and 4, a selection has not yet been made in step 1. You have to make a selection in step 1 to populate the boxes in subsequent steps.

13. Why are the items in the selection boxes in steps 3 and 4 out of order?

This may be due to the browser you are using to access the data query tool. Some web browsers (IE8, IE9 and Chrome) may sort the list by values instead of the order established by our web team. It is recommended that you use Internet Explorer 7 or FireFox to access the data query tool.

14. How to find more detailed instructions on query using the new interface?

If you still have questions not addressed here, please contact the project director via email at ferry@dot.gov or BTS Information Services by phone at 800-853-1351.