

Overview of the ABARES General Surveillance Program Manual - for Program Design, Monitoring and Evaluation

Why the Manual was developed

General surveillance programs operate in complex, changing environments and often rely on diverse stakeholders (e.g., community groups, industry, laboratories and government). Previous ABARES research found that successful programs tend to use adaptive management and continuous improvement to ensure programs remain fit for purpose and cost-effective despite this complexity.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) provide a systematic way to learn what is working and demonstrate outcomes and value for decision-makers and investors. Monitoring tracks progress against what the program intends to achieve and supports adaptive management. Evaluation assesses effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness at a point in time, supporting judgements about a program's merit (value) and worth (usefulness). While many general surveillance programs implement aspects of M&E, there has been a lack of comprehensive, practical guidance tailored to general surveillance programs.

What the Manual provides

The [General Surveillance Program Manual](#) supports program coordinators and teams to design or refine general surveillance programs, including a monitoring and evaluation component that is practical and fit for purpose. It provides clear, step-by-step guidance across three stages (see Figure 1), supported by adaptable templates, worksheets and realistic examples.

The Manual combines systems thinking with the Measurement, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) approach. Systems thinking involves looking at how all the parts connect and affect each other, instead of just considering one part at a time. MERI involves establishing a clear program logic, based on a theory of how change will happen over time to achieve the program objective, and identifying monitoring points to track performance as the program progresses. This allows for early intervention if needed.

The ABARES Social Sciences research team had drafted a Manual by mid-2024; between September 2024 and February 2026, the draft has been piloted with five general surveillance programs across animal, plant, environmental and marine sectors, representing different levels of maturity, locations and scales. Pilot programs included NABSnet and SOS Wild Birds (SOSWB). Findings from the pilot testing have been used to refine the Manual to ensure it is user-friendly, effective and fit for purpose in a range of contexts.

The Manual forms a companion to the [Guidelines for General Surveillance Programs](#) published by ABARES Social Sciences Program in 2022, which outlines key design considerations for general surveillance programs based on nine case studies.

How to access the Manual

The estimated release time of the final Manual is July 2026 and it will be made available on the [General Surveillance Program Manual](#) webpage.

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Attachment A to Australian Government Report

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Figure 1. Three stages for general surveillance program design for continual improvement

