



CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

ABSTRACT

The Census of Agriculture is the most comprehensive source of data portraying our nation's agriculture over time. The census is conducted every five years by the United States Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA NASS) and is used by government agencies, policymakers, producers, farm and ranch organizations, and state and local governments to plan for agriculture and to implement farm-related programs and policies. The Census of Agriculture is a reliable source for a variety of agricultural data— notably production and operator characteristics—on national, state and county levels. Data from the Census of Agriculture are available on the NASS Census of Agriculture Web pages or by calling a state NASS office.

DESCRIPTION

The Census of Agriculture is the most comprehensive source of facts and statistics about agricultural production in the U.S. Taken every five years, it is a "complete count" of farms and agricultural production. It is the only source of uniform agricultural data for every state and county in the U.S., as well as outlying areas.

The Census of Agriculture includes information about:

- Land use and ownership;
- Crop and livestock production;
- Value of agricultural products sold;
- Value of agricultural assets;
- Operator expenses;
- Federal farm program participation and payments; and
- Operator characteristics such as age, days worked off farm and principal occupation.

The 2007 Census of Agriculture (2007 Census) was authorized by the "Census of Agriculture Act of 1997," Public Law 105-113 (Title 7, United States Code, Section 2204g). The law directs the Secretary of Agriculture to conduct a Census of Agriculture in 1998 and in every fifth year after, covering the prior year.

Census of Agriculture's Definition of a "Farm"

For the purpose of the Census of Agriculture, a "farm" is any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year. The \$1,000 value is not adjusted for inflation. For the 2007 Census, operations receiving \$1,000 or more in federal government payments were also counted as farms, even if they had no sales and otherwise lacked the potential to have \$1,000 or more in sales.

History

The Census of Agriculture was originally conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census. The first questions about agricultural production were included as part of the sixth census of population in 1840. From 1840 to 1920, a Census of Agriculture was taken every 10 years. Since 1920, there has been a Census of Agriculture every five years. Through a provision in the 1997 Appropriations Act, responsibility for the Census of Agriculture was transferred to the NASS. The 2007 Census is the nation's 27th census.

In 2002, the NASS began adjusting the data to account for farms missed or misclassified during data collection. The method of weighting data, referred to as "coverage adjustment," caused an apparent increase in the number of farms, "farmers" and "land in farms" between 1997 and 2002. In general, data generated from the 2007 Census are comparable to data from the 2002 Census but not directly comparable to data from earlier census years. Changes to questions on the census questionnaire also may affect the comparability of census items. Check Appendix B., General Explanation and Census of Agriculture Report Form, to confirm comparability of specific items.

HIGHLIGHTS

According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, there are 2.2 million farms in the U.S. encompassing 922 million acres. Farmers and ranchers manage 40.8 percent of the nation's land area.

Fifty-seven percent of the nation's principal farm operators are ages 55 and older. These same operators manage 527 million acres, or 57 percent, of the U.S. land in farms. In contrast, operators 34 and younger represent 5.4 percent of principal operators and manage only 4 percent of the land in farms.

In 2007, the market value of agricultural products sold directly to consumers for human consumption rose from \$812 million to \$1.2 billion (figures are in current dollars and have not been adjusted for inflation). The number of farms selling food directly to consumers rose from 116,733 to 136,817, or 17 percent. Nationwide, 78,418 farms reported producing and selling value-added products; 12,549 farms marketed products through community supported agriculture.

FUNCTIONS AND PURPOSE

The Census of Agriculture provides a detailed picture of U.S. farms and ranches every five years. It is the only source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every state and county (or county equivalent) in the U.S. and illustrates national and local trends in agriculture over time.

Federal officials used the first survey of agricultural production—gathered through questions included in the 1840 population census—to ensure an adequate supply of food, inform domestic policy and foreign trade negotiations, and help producers decide what to plant and assess the value of their crops.

Today, the detailed information captured by the census is used to:

- Validate production estimates and forecasts;
- Study historical trends and identify emerging issues;
- Assess the current condition of the agricultural sector and implications for the broader economy;
- Calculate key economic indicators like the Gross Domestic Product and Producer Price Index;
- Develop and evaluate policies and programs that help agricultural producers;
- Allocate local and national funds for agricultural programs such as Extension service projects, agricultural research, soil conservation programs and land-grant colleges and universities; and
- Assist farmers and ranchers in spotting trends in crop and livestock production.

Census of Agriculture data are routinely used by federal agencies such as the USDA Economic Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office, farm organizations, businesses, state departments of agriculture, elected representatives and legislative bodies at all levels of government, public and private sector analysts, and colleges and universities.

HOW TO ACCESS DATA

The NASS compiles the census data into tables that are published as the Geographic Area Series publications, which are available in hard copy, electronically and on CD ROM. Geographic Area Series publications can be found at certain libraries and government offices but are most easily accessed through the NASS Web site, www.agcensus.usda.gov/.

On the NASS Census of Agriculture Web pages, National-, State-, and County-level data from the 2007 Census are prominently featured, as are data from outlying areas and data on Specialty Products and Special Studies.

“U.S. Summary and State Reports” provide figures for the entire nation. “U.S. by Table” links to an index for 65 data tables that include national totals. “All States by Table” connects to a list of 56 tables with figures for each state and the entire U.S. side by side. “State and County Reports” provide the same complement of tables but within one state. For example, “State Level by Table” links to an index for 65 tables that provide totals for a selected state. “All Counties by State by Table” accesses a list of 56 tables with figures for each county within a state presented alongside state totals. Many tables list data for 2007 alongside data from 2002. Complete earlier censuses are available through links on the NASS census Web pages.

In addition to data tables, the Geographic Area Series publications include an Introduction, Appendices and an Index. The Introduction provides a brief overview of the goals of the census, its history and uses, as well as a section detailing the changes in data collection—which occurred between the 2002 and 2007 censuses—and the resulting issue of comparability. The Appendices contain an explanation of the census methodology, including data collection, nonresponse estimation and coverage adjustment. The appendices also include a description of data changes, definitions and a copy of the report form.

The Index lists census table items alongside the page number where they are located in the published text. The Introduction, Appendices and Index are available in the



Geographic Area Series publications and through any of the four links to National-, State- or County-level data on the NASS census Web pages: "U.S. by Table," "All States by Table," "State Level by Table," and "All Counties by State by Table."

Several additional special publications are prepared from each census. These include Fact Sheets, County Profiles, State and County Highlights, Congressional Districts, and the Atlas.

The NASS Census of Agriculture Web site also allows users to build a query in order to locate specific data. Rather than receiving all data for a specified region, individuals create a specific query search by data columns, data tables, data items and geographic regions.

NASS staff are available on a state or regional basis to answer questions and provide more details about finding information. A NASS Field Office directory is available on-line at www.nass.usda.gov/About_NASS/sso_directory.pdf. The NASS Customer Services Office can be reached by calling (800) 727-9540.

LIMITATIONS

- Data from years prior to 2002 are not directly comparable to those from 2007 due to new methods used for data collection beginning in 2002. An explanation of the change in statistical methodology is included in the Appendices of the Geographic Area Series publications.

- Census of Agriculture data are published every five years, generally two years after the data have been collected. In years between the census, the NASS provides estimates on a variety of agricultural topics.
- Decrease of land in farms data cannot be used to determine farmland conversion to other uses. The best source for agricultural land conversion data is the National Resources Inventory (NRI), a statistical survey of natural resource conditions, land use and trends on nonfederal land. The NRI reports on all land use changes over a given time period. For more information about the NRI, see the Farmland Information Center NRI Technical Memo.
- Dollar figures are expressed in current dollars and have not been adjusted for inflation or deflation.
- The market value of agricultural products sold directly to consumers for human consumption excludes sales of non-edible farm products such as flowers and Christmas trees. As a result, census figures undercount the true economic contribution of direct marketing to local communities.

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