Every year USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) collects numbers from farmers; estimates livestock numbers, crop acres, yields and production; and includes these numbers in more than 300 different reports. Then, every five years the Bureau of the Census conducts the Census of Agriculture. In these censuses every farmer throughout the country provides the Census with detailed information about their farming activities. In turn, people appropriately ask, "Why do we have a Census of Agriculture in addition to a current agriculture statistics program? Haven't these Washington data collectors heard about duplication, respondent burden, and budget deficits?" The direct answer is that we need both.

Most of the NASS reports are based on probability sample surveys. They depend on drawing samples from lists of producers and from areas where crops are grown and livestock are raised. These surveys provide reliable national and state estimates of major crop acreages, livestock inventories, and production intentions. The samples are sufficiently large to provide reliable county estimates for a limited number of commodities. Since samples are used rather than complete enumerations, NASS surveys can be efficiently conducted at reasonable cost on an annual, quarterly, or even more frequent basis. Importantly, most estimates are available within a month, or even sooner for the Weekly Weather and Crop Bulletin. Farmers and agribusinesses rely on these timely estimates to make production and marketing decisions. They benefit from knowing in advance what estimates will be available and exactly what timetable will be followed for publication.

On the other hand, the Census of Agriculture, which is conducted in years ending in 2 and 7, has a much different scope and purpose. The census is the only source of uniform county level data for the entire nation. It is the data collection effort which covers many of the specialized crop and livestock enterprises that are important to the total agriculture picture. It is the point-in-time picture of ALL agriculture. And it is the only source that gathers and publishes acreages, production, and inventory data, cross-tabulated with characteristics of operator, type of organization, and farm related income. Census data also show farm program participation, irrigation practices, production expenses, machinery and equipment, fertilizer usage, market value of land and buildings, and insecticide and other chemical usage. The result is a wealth of detailed county level data which supplies a broad range of data to analysts, farmers, and agribusinesses. These data complement the current statistics developed and published by NASS.

It is expensive to collect, edit, followup, review, and publish county level data. It takes almost 6 months of census data collection and 18 months of review and publishing activities to complete the last state in the operation. Sufficient resources for the extensive Census of Agriculture are only available every 5 years.

There is an implicit benefit to having both the Census and USDA programs—data quality. Both programs keep data related to individual farms strictly confidential. However, it is possible to compare estimates at the county, state, and national level. These comparisons permit benchmarking particular data series and they stimulate reviews of statistical procedures.

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First Quarter 1988