The Census of Agriculture Moves to USDA

The 1997 Appropriations Act, which funded the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), shifted the responsibility for the Census of Agriculture from the Bureau of the Census to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). This little-noticed change was a historic event that finally consolidated, within one federal agency, the agricultural statistics program for the United States. It may seem hard to believe that, for more than 150 years, farmers and ranchers have been asked to report to two separate federal agencies.

For decades agricultural economists, researchers, scholars, farm and trade organizations, Congress, and countless others have relied on quality agricultural data to study historical trends, assess current conditions, and speculate about the future on a daily basis. The census transfer no doubt leads data users to ask, How will this significant change affect data collection, processing, and the quality of the results?

The merger of the census and NASS resources blends unique historical census expertise, thorough agricultural knowledge, and grassroots support. The census data collection and results will only improve in quality and efficiency. This transfer benefits respondents, data users, and taxpayers, a win-win situation. But first, for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the census data, a brief explanation is in order.

What is the Census of Agriculture?

Simply put, the census provides the most complete, detailed information about agriculture in America and the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands. As its name states, the Census of Agriculture covers every farm and ranch operation in the nation, and reports aggregated totals to the national, state, county, and, in many cases, zip code level. Data include number of farms, land use, production expenses, value of production, farm size, land values, crops, livestock production, and basic characteristics of farm operators not available from any other source. These data are especially important to the agricultural community to measure changes at the local level.

The Bureau of the Census conducted the first Census of Agriculture in 1840; coincidentally, NASS issued its first crop report in 1842. In addition to the Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years, the Bureau of the Census managed various additional projects, such as the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey, the Census of Horticultural Specialties, and the Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, to gather more specific data from a sample of farms that reported in the census. NASS will continue these types of special studies as part of its census program.

New authority and support for the Census of Agriculture

Transfer of the census to USDA places authority for conducting the Census of Agriculture with the secretary of agriculture rather than the secretary of commerce. This makes sense, because it is the secretary of agriculture whose programs are most directly affected by the census.

The Census Bureau’s ever-tightening budget threatened major changes to the 1997 Census of Agriculture. For example, plans were underway to revise the farm definition from farms with $1,000 or more in annual sales to those with $10,000 or more in annual sales. This revision would have dropped 47 percent of the eligible farms from the census count, which would have seriously affected the comparability of current and historical census data. NASS will maintain the farm definition at sales of $1,000 or more for the 1997 Census of Agriculture, which will be comparable in scope to prior censuses. Of course, information will continue to be available by level of annual sales.

Involving stakeholders

Throughout the census process, the Census Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics provides assistance and consultation for various decisions and activities. Comprised of members from twenty-one different agricultural organizations covering both data users and respondents, this committee reviews content, processes, and key issues involved in the census, such as the farm definition or changes to the questionnaire, to ensure minimal respondent burden, high-quality data, and useful products. Represented entities include the National Association of State De-
Market value of agricultural products sold (ranking by state, 1992)

Source: 1992 Census of Agriculture

- Less than $0.5 billion
- $0.5 to $1.9 billion
- $2.0 to $3.4 billion
- $3.5 to $4.9 billion
- $5.0 billion or more

Improved efficiency in data collection

Not only did the move of the Census of Agriculture from the Department of Commerce to USDA mean the transfer of a program, but it also meant the transfer of people. Nearly seventy full-time staff members left the Census Bureau to become part of the new Census Division at NASS. This merging of efforts brings many benefits to both the census and current NASS surveys. NASS places top priority on the census, and will allocate adequate resources to produce a high-quality census.

Most farmers and ranchers never understood why they were required to report to both the Bureau of the Census and NASS. Many others thought that the Census of Agriculture was part of USDA. No doubt, reporting to two agencies caused additional respondent confusion and frustration. The new system will ease some of those burdens. Respondents who are concerned about privacy can rest assured that NASS, like the Bureau of the Census, possesses a firm commitment to confidentiality and holds an impeccable track record of maintaining the confidentiality of individual records.

The consolidated process is also financially beneficial, as it results in cost savings to the federal government and, ultimately, to the taxpayer. Previously, both agencies needed to build and maintain separate mailing lists of U.S. farms and ranches, a significant expense of funds and other resources. The coordinated effort should result in one master mailing list with less duplication of farms, a savings of a million dollars in mail list maintenance alone.

A key benefit of the new system is that the census can now take advantage of NASS's forty-five state offices and the unique partnerships these state offices maintain with state departments of agriculture and land-grant universities. Involvement of the NASS state offices places the census in a favorable position to obtain grassroots advice and support, and brings accountability for response and quality closer to the providers and users of the data. This should boost response rates and significantly improve data quality. In addition, working on NASS's ongoing agricultural surveys program will strengthen the skills and knowledge of census staff, which will, in turn, both increase the efficiency of the census project and improve NASS's surveys.

Improved data products

Data users can expect faster data release and improved quality from the 1997 Census of Agriculture. Heavy involvement by NASS's state offices will speed data processing, resulting in the release of the census data products six months earlier than the initial schedule, a tremendous improvement given the importance and the time-sensitive nature of these data.

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NASS will release the census data on three major media: printed reports, CD-ROMs, and the Internet. All Census of Agriculture reports will be available for free on the Internet. In fact, data users may currently access Census of Agriculture and NASS products, including published reports, charts,

For the 1997 Census of Agriculture, NASS will offer customers an entirely new CD-ROM product line. The 1997 census results will be housed in a three-CD set that is a 32-bit Windows-based product including state and county data bases and page image files. Customized front-end viewing and extraction software, also Windows based, will accompany the state and county data bases. Customers may choose to view and print tables, or download data into spreadsheet, data base, or ASCII (comma-delimited or structured) formats. The page image files display the actual printed report on your personal computer; this offers the convenience of printing only portions of the published reports as needed. Data users who want an even more local picture will enjoy the 1997 Census of Agriculture results aggregated to the zip code level, also available on CD-ROM.

For customers who require (or simply prefer) to have a paper copy on hand, NASS will publish the U.S. Summary, state volumes, and other census reports in printed form as the Bureau of the Census did in the past. Copies of the printed reports will be sent to each State Data Center and Depository Library. Individual reports may be ordered through the NASS state offices and the Census of Agriculture Information Office.

Researchers desiring access and analysis of census micro data may find that opportunity through the census computer lab. Of course, all users of the lab must adhere to strict confidentiality requirements. While no micro data may be released, analysts can explore relationships among agricultural variables relevant to environmental, resource management, and productivity trends and developments. NASS is considering a plan to establish links from the computer lab to each state office; this will cut expenses for those who previously needed to travel to Washington, D.C., if they wished to conduct this type of detailed research.

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Looking to the future
The consolidation of the census and NASS staffs not only affects the census program, but also impacts current NASS surveys. After completion of the census, NASS intends to review its entire surveys program. Census data will provide NASS with the opportunity to improve the efficiency of its sampling techniques and data quality reviews. Not only will this benefit data users by increased accuracy of the NASS information, but it will also reduce respondent burden for current surveys by helping NASS ask only questions that apply to a respondent’s particular operation.

Both respondents and data users can rest assured that the Census of Agriculture, as a part of NASS, will continue to serve the needs and interests of all members of the agricultural community. What might have been a problematic move has instead been a smooth, planned, and well-organized transition of responsibilities and roles, thanks to the cooperation of all people and organizations involved.

For more information
- Internet access to data and information products: [www.usda.gov/nass/](http://www.usda.gov/nass/)
- NASS State offices: 1-888-4AG-STAT
- Census of Agriculture Information Office: 1-800-523-3215

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