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Current Statistics and Agriculture Census

by Rich Allen and Bud Pautler

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

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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. **G**

COVERAGE COMPARISON

Current reports from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, cover approximately 120 crops and 45 livestock items. Also included are estimates of number of farms, land in farms, cold storage supplies, farm labor, prices received by farmers for products, and prices paid by farmers for commodities and services. Most estimates are related to state and national totals.

The agriculture census conducted by the Bureau of the Census attempts to cover all agricultural production, including speciality operations such as worm farms. A large part of the Census data is made available at the county level. However, in order to avoid disclosing individual operations, not all census information can be published at the county level.

TIMING COMPARISON

Report forms for the 1987 Census of Agriculture were mailed just after Christmas in 1987. The listed due date is February 1, 1988. However, followup letters and telephone calls will be used through July 1988 to maximize the response rate. Publication of preliminary county and state reports will begin as early as September 1988. The first final state and county reports should be finished by December 1988. All of the final state reports will be published by November 1989.

NASS surveys are on different time schedules. The December 1987 Quarterly Agricultural Survey of the National Agricultural Statistics Service began on December 1, 1987, with mail questionnaires and telephone calls. Mail, telephone, and personal contacts were used to account for all 88,000 sampled farms. Data collection was completed by December 16. Data were edited and reviewed during the last half of December. Hog estimates were released January 6, 1988, and grain stocks and annual crop production estimates were available on January 14.