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Socio-Economic Factors Affecting
Land Use: Comparisons
with the USDA National Survey

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The NE-125 effort to survey rural landowners coincided with and consequently is complementary to a national survey recently conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey provides information on the features of private landowners in the coterminous U.S. and Hawaii. This comprehensive data base allows one to place patterns of landownership in the Northeast in perspective with patterns of ownership found in other multi-state regions. I want to discuss that subject briefly, drawing on regional summaries of the survey results (Bills and Daugherty; Gustafson, 1980; Gustafson, 1981; D. Lewis; Moyer). My remarks are prefaced by a description of the USDA survey.^{1/}

The 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey

More than 37,000 individuals, partnerships, and corporations were surveyed by the USDA in 1978 to fashion a description of about 28.8 million owners of 1.3 billion acres of privately held U.S. land. The survey is a component of a 12-part package of interrelated information on and about the Nation's land resources. The first part is the Soil Conservation Service's 1977 Natural Resource Inventory -- a description of the use and quality of land. The second part is the Land Ownership Survey discussed today. The other 10 parts are follow-on surveys, initiated to focus upon transfers of ownership, cropland improvements, irrigation, and investments or disinvestments in land conservation measures.

The object of the USDA Landownership Survey (LOS) was to obtain core information on the features of private landowners. The survey results must be

^{1/} See J. Lewis for a more detailed discussion of the LOS survey procedure.

interpreted in light of the procedures used to accomplish the survey:

- The LOS was linked to the 1977 National Resource Inventory effort to collect physical data on 3 sample points in each of 70,000 land units referred to as Primary Sampling Units (PSU). A PSU is generally 160 acres in size. The name and address of the owner of the first point in each PSU was incorporated into the LOS survey.
- About 12,000 of the 70,000 points fell on land owned by units of government or land held in trust for Indian tribes. These publically owned lands were excluded from the LOS. Names and addresses were obtained for 52,000 of the 58,000 points found to be held in private ownership. Many names and addresses that could not be obtained were in densely populated areas.
- The owners of land parcels encompassing these 52,000 sample points were contacted by mail. A first and second mailing and a telephone follow-up on nonrespondents ultimately resulted in the collection of about 37,300 usable questionnaires.
- The questionnaire responses were expanded to obtain owner and acreage totals for the Nation, for States, and for regions. The expansions are land based. The expansion factor reflects the probability of selection in the SCS sample.
- The owner of the parcel encompassing a sample point was asked to report upon all land parcels owned in the county. Thus, the survey results deal with ownership units. Each ownership entity was counted as one unit, regardless of the number of separate land parcels owned. For the Nation, each ownership unit in the LOS owned an average of 1.62 parcels on the average.

LOS and NE-125 Survey Results

Before highlighting region-to-region similarities and contrasts in LOS data, it is worth noting that a cursory look at LOS and NE-125 survey results suggests that they may give one a like impression about the characteristics of rural landowners. The resemblance can be demonstrated by briefly comparing NE-125 tabulations (for owners of rural parcels containing five or more acres) with LOS tabulations for farmland ownership units (excluding corporations and large partnerships):

Characteristic	LOS Farm and Ranchland Ownership Units	NE-125 Rural Landowners
	- - - Percent - - -	
Husband and wife are joint owners	53	61
Owner is a sole proprietor	36	29
Land was -- purchased	78	81
-- inherited	16	14
Owner is -- a farmer	16	10
-- retired	20	14

These comparisons are refinable in the sense that the LOS data could be sorted to isolate a subset of owners who would fall within the sampling frame used in the NE-125 survey. We probably need a better understanding of the procedural problems that surround efforts to fashion credible and cost-effective descriptions of rural landowners. Close scrutiny of the NE-125 and LOS data sets might prove useful.

Regional Contrasts in Landownership

The Northeast is the Nation's oldest and most densely populated region.^{2/} Much of the population is urban, but rural areas are relatively densely populated,

^{2/} For purposes here, the Northeast is defined to include Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

too. Reductions in resources committed to agricultural uses have been abrupt, particularly since World War II. The region's total population has stabilized at about 49.1 million but two states (New York and Rhode Island) incurred population losses during the 1970-80 decade. The decreases were small but unprecedented. On the other hand, New England's 1970-80 population increase amounted to 4.2 percent -- New Hampshire's was about 25 percent.

Broad social and economic trends such as these are eventually reflected in the pattern of rural landownership. They should generate contrasts with other regions in the U.S. LOS data for farm and ranch land, summarized by Census Region, help illuminate some of these ownership patterns.^{3/}

Occupation

A relatively small amount of farmland in the Northeast is owned by individuals who consider their principal occupation to be a farm laborer, farm manager or a farm operator (Table 1). Nationally, the LOS data suggest that 53 percent of all farm and ranch land is owned by farmers; 41 percent is owned by farmers in the Northeast. The fraction owned by the retired compares with that for the Nation as a whole. A notably high fraction of all farmland is owned by "white collar" workers in the Northeast.

Type of Owner

There is considerable homogeneity across Census Regions with respect to type of owner (Table 2). Sole proprietorships and joint ownerships by husband and wife predominate. About 81 percent of all farmland in the Northeast falls in this category. The incidence of corporate ownership in the Northeast is relatively low but similar to that estimated for the North Central states; holdings by corporate entities are relatively large in the West.

^{3/} This section is largely drawn from Gustafson (1981).

Size of Holding

Farmland in the Northeast is owned in relatively small pieces (Table 3). About one-third of all farmland is held by ownership units with less than 100 acres; 54 percent of all acreage is held by owners with 100 to 499 acres. As expected, holdings are far larger in the West where owners commit much agricultural land to extensive crop and grazing uses.

Method of Acquisition

Purchase is the principal route to landownership throughout the U.S. (Table 4). About 80 percent of all acreage in the Northeast was purchased. Purchases account for a relatively small fraction of all farmland acreage in the South -- about one-fourth of all farmland was acquired via inheritance in the Southern states. Gifts are a relatively unimportant means of acquiring farmland in the U.S.

Period of Acquisition

The timing of farm and ranch land acquisition is virtually identical from region to region (Table 5). About 55 percent of all farmland in the Northeast was acquired after 1959.

Age and Education

Nearly half of all farmland owners are over 55 and they hold over 50 percent of noncorporate farmland in the U.S. (Table 6). Owners under 35 hold only about 5 percent of the farmland. There is little region-to-region variation in the distribution of farmland among age groups. About 60 percent of U.S. farmland is held by owners with at least a high school education (Table 7). The proportion of all land held by owners with some college training was highest in the West -- about 40 percent.

Table 1 -- Occupation: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland^{1/}

Occupation	U.S. Total ^{2/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
Farming ^{3/}	53.6	41.4	54.8	42.8	70.1
White collar	13.4	18.9	10.5	18.7	9.2
Blue collar ^{4/}	7.6	16.2	7.1	9.6	4.0
Retired	15.8	15.0	17.7	18.2	9.2
Other	4.1	3.9	4.5	4.2	3.3
No response	5.5	4.6	5.4	6.5	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Not including corporations and large partnerships.

^{2/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

^{3/} Including farm managers and farm laborers.

^{4/} Including private household and service workers.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 2 -- Type of landowner: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland

Type of Landowner	U.S. Total ^{1/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
Sole proprietor	35.8	31.5	37.4	42.1	25.6
Husband-wife	35.7	50.6	44.1	29.7	30.0
Family partnership	12.1	9.2	9.9	13.5	13.8
Nonfamily partnership	2.0	2.3	0.9	2.1	3.2
Family corporation	6.6	2.0	3.6	3.8	15.3
Nonfamily corporation	3.9	2.8	1.1	3.1	9.2
Miscellaneous	3.9	1.6	3.0	5.7	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 3 -- Size of Holdings: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland

Size of Holdings	U.S. Total ^{1/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
Less than 100 acres	13.5	33.1	11.8	18.6	5.7
100 - 499 acres	36.4	54.3	51.3	36.6	12.8
500 - 4,999 acres	33.1	11.0	33.1	29.7	41.0
5,000 and over	17.0	1.6	3.8	15.1	40.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 4 -- Method of Acquisition: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland

Method of Acquisition	U.S. Total ^{1/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
Purchased from nonrelative	54.0	59.4	51.8	50.3	61.3
Inherited	18.7	13.1	17.9	24.7	18.7
Purchased from relative	17.0	20.9	20.9	14.3	17.0
Gift	2.3	1.3	2.3	2.5	2.3
Other	1.9	1.3	1.3	1.6	1.9
No response	6.1	4.0	5.8	6.6	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 5.-- Period of Acquisition: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland

Period of Acquisition	U.S. Total ^{1/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
1970-78	27.7	27.6	29.4	25.6	28.1
1960-69	24.6	27.8	26.3	22.2	25.0
1950-59	16.7	18.8	17.3	16.4	16.1
1940-49	12.8	12.7	13.0	13.1	12.1
Before 1940	13.5	11.2	9.9	16.7	14.3
No response	4.7	1.9	4.1	6.0	4.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 6 -- Age of Landowner: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland^{1/}

Age of Landowner	U.S. Total ^{2/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
Under 25	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.4
25 - 34	5.0	7.3	6.1	4.2	4.1
35 - 44	13.2	15.9	14.1	11.6	13.6
45 - 54	22.4	24.0	22.1	21.0	24.9
55 - 64	24.5	25.3	24.3	24.5	24.8
65 and over	27.8	23.0	27.4	31.3	24.0
No response	6.6	3.8	5.5	6.9	8.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Excluding corporations and large partnerships.

^{2/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

Table 7 -- Education of Landowner: Regional distribution of acres owned, farm and ranchland

Years of Schooling	U.S. Total ^{1/}	Census Region			
		Northeast	North Central	South	West
- - - Percent of Acres - - -					
8 or fewer	17.9	17.0	23.2	16.9	11.2
9 - 11	10.8	13.9	9.6	13.3	8.4
12	29.2	33.8	34.9	22.2	29.7
13 - 15	14.4	12.9	12.2	14.6	18.0
16 or more	17.6	16.6	11.8	20.9	22.1
No response	10.1	5.8	8.3	12.1	10.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^{1/} Revised, excluding Alaska.

Source: 1978 ESCS Landownership Survey.

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