

National Agricultural Statistics Service

Strategic Plan, FYs 2010-2015



United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service



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Message from the Administrator



The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) provides timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture. As the statistical agency for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), NASS also conducts statistical science research on survey design, sampling and other methodological issues. NASS is positioned within the USDA Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area, which delivers the research, tools and statistical data needed by the rest of USDA.

NASS provides key statistical information and basic research essential for making informed policy decisions. Our efforts also provide statistical data necessary for orderly production and marketing decisions by farmers, ranchers and other agricultural businesses. We are the measuring stick for the performance of U.S. agriculture.

The FY 2010-2015 NASS Strategic Plan aligns with the USDA Strategic Plan, which articulates a comprehensive agenda for USDA, and the REE Action Plan, which presents an assertive and progressive approach to transforming REE into a high-profile information and research organization.

NASS is the official source of comprehensive, current, reliable information on U.S. farms and ranches, including inventory, production, demographics, structure, resources, prices, economic situation and environmental practices. We have a tremendous responsibility to U.S. agriculture, which generates 14 percent of our nation's gross domestic product and employs about 14 percent of the U.S. workforce. We are committed to following the principles and practices for an effective statistical agency set out by the National Academies' Committee on National Statistics. We continually strive to remain relevant, retain credibility among data users, continue our relationship of trust with data providers, and maintain our independence from both the appearance and the reality of political control.

It is vital that the American people and agricultural communities trust us to provide the reliable and unbiased information they need. As part of our commitment, NASS must continue to show gratitude and respect for our voluntary data providers, our current and future cooperative partners, and those who use the data and services we provide. To be successful, we must listen to our customers, remain flexible, and respond to changing needs. We must be unbiased in our work and in our relationships. The level of service NASS provides will ultimately define our success. Strong teamwork promotes our combined success and contributes to better customer decisions affecting agricultural communities and the public.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cynthia Clark". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Cynthia Clark
Administrator

Mission Statement

We provide timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U. S. agriculture.

Vision Statement

NASS:

- Is the “go to” source for useful, accurate statistics on U.S. agricultural production, economics, land, water, energy and environmental management, and farmer and rancher demographics based on timely surveys and the census of agriculture conducted every five years.
- Provides statistical leadership for those seeking counsel, survey services, or data products relating to agricultural and rural statistics, a standard achieved by consistently demonstrating sound methodology, effective resource utilization, and a focus on customer service.
- Continually earns the trust and respect of those who provide data by protecting the confidentiality of their reported information, minimizing their reporting burden, and providing everyone equal access to official statistics.
- Fosters a close relationship among employees, who are strengthened by the diversity of their cultures and backgrounds, enjoy their important and challenging careers, and share an unsurpassed level of dedication and competence in service to U.S. agriculture.

Core Values

NASS follows *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* (National Academies Press) identified by the Committee on National Statistics. These principles are:

- **Relevance to Policy Issues** – We will remain knowledgeable about the issues and requirements of public policy and Federal programs and able to provide objective information relevant to policy and program needs.
- **Credibility among Data Users** – We will maintain credibility with our data users by issuing complete and accurate statistical information.
- **Trust among Data Providers** – We will continue the relationship of mutual respect and trust with our respondents who provide their personal data in support of our statistical program.
- **Independence within the Government** – We will maintain a strong position of independence from the appearance and reality of political control.

The practices that help us adhere to these principles include:

- A clearly defined and well-accepted mission
- Continual development of more useful data
- Openness about data sources and limitations
- Wide dissemination of data
- Cooperation with data users
- Fair treatment of data providers
- Commitment to quality and professional standards of practice
- An active research program

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- Professional advancement of staff
 - A strong internal and external evaluation program
 - Coordination and cooperation with other statistical agencies

Civil Rights Commitment

Consistent with USDA civil rights policies, NASS firmly enforces all Federal civil rights laws, Executive orders, and regulations. Treating all employees, job applicants and customers with fairness, equality and respect is a core agency value. NASS prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, age, national origin, religion, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status in all of its programs and activities. The agency maintains a discrimination-free workplace at its offices throughout the United States and Puerto Rico and protects all employees, job applicants and customers from sexual and non-sexual harassment, retaliation, and reprisal. NASS cultivates an inclusive workplace environment where the unique qualities, experiences, and talents of every employee are valued, nurtured and appreciated.

Legislative Mandate

The foundation of NASS began with the establishment of USDA in 1862. Agricultural supply information was one of the purposes of the new department. The first official report on the condition of crops began in July 1863. The basic, mission-oriented program continues today in the USDA forecasts and estimates provided by the NASS Agricultural Statistics Board. NASS's responsibilities are authorized under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 (7 U.S.C. 1621-1627) and the Census of Agriculture Act of 1997, Public Law 105-113 (7 U.S.C. 2204g). Public Law 105-113 transferred responsibility for the census of agriculture and other special studies from the Department of Commerce to NASS. Conducted every five years, the census provides comprehensive information about the nation's agriculture down to the county level.

About a third of the agency's staff is located at its Washington, D.C., Headquarters offices, with the rest of the staff located in offices around the country serving all fifty States and Puerto Rico. The agency maintains a list of farms and ranches in the United States, one of its unique Federal roles. NASS also performs important reimbursable agricultural survey work for other Federal agencies, State governments and producer organizations, and provides technical assistance for agricultural statistics programs in developing countries.

Relationships with Partners, Customers and Stakeholders

As the primary statistical agency for USDA, NASS services the data needs of many agencies inside and outside the Department. We partner with State departments of agriculture and land-grant universities to meet State, local and national needs for agricultural statistics. Through cooperative agreements going back as far as 1917 and memoranda of understanding, NASS field offices serve jointly as the Federal field office and the State government agricultural statistical office. NASS also provides data collection and statistical services to other Federal agencies and provides statistics to the public through trust fund agreements with private producer organizations when Federal funding is inadequate. This rich tradition of working with cooperators serves U.S. agriculture well because the collaborations generate a great deal of information at minimal cost and lighten the burden on survey respondents by preventing duplication of effort and maintaining consistency.

NASS collaborates with universities throughout the United States, including the land-grant universities, on research to improve statistical methodologies and practices. A recent partnership with the National Institute of Statistical Sciences brings together the best academic and NASS researchers to solve challenges facing the agricultural statistics program.

Our collaboration and partnership with more than 40 community-based organizations (CBOs) with a national presence, as well as countless local associations, facilitate our outreach to limited resource and historically underserved producers. These groups work with NASS staff to ensure their constituents are represented and that the census includes all farms and ranches, regardless of size, location or type of operation. NASS also partners with these groups to provide hands-on assistance and support to local producers—including non-English speakers—in filling out their census forms. NASS targets media outreach to print and broadcast outlets that reach small, minority, and non-English-speaking producers.

Through these partnerships, underserved and limited resource producers learn about the many programs available through USDA. Partners receive resources and training to reach out to the grassroots communities they serve, and they help disseminate and promote use of NASS data. Many work as census of agriculture enumerators, explaining the importance of responding to the surveys and helping producers work through language barriers. In general, the partnerships are outlined in memoranda of understanding between a community-based organization and NASS Headquarters or a State field office; a cooperative agreement may provide financial assistance to a CBO.

Through our field office structure, we work closely with American Indian tribes and nations throughout the United States to increase the number of agricultural producers in Indian country participating in the census of agriculture. We coordinate these efforts closely with our USDA partners and USDA's Office of Tribal Relations. Although we must continue such efforts, we are pleased that the 2007 Census of Agriculture showed greatly improved coverage for this important sector of our nation.

We also consider the thousands of voluntary data suppliers as partners in the important task of monitoring the nation's agricultural output, facilitating orderly and efficient markets, and measuring the economic health of those in agriculture.

NASS receives feedback from stakeholders on both program content and its customer service through a variety of forums, including data user meetings. We sponsor such annual meetings specifically to ensure that the agricultural statistics program meets the needs of the data user community. Data user responses have played a vital role in shaping the agency's annual and long-range planning activities. With the transfer of the agriculture census from the Department of Commerce, NASS has gained an Advisory Committee that now provides guidance on the entire agricultural statistics program.

Critical Success Factors

Eleven critical factors contribute to our effectiveness and impact how well we meet the goals in the NASS Strategic Plan:

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- Voluntary respondent cooperation
 - Trained data collection interviewers
 - Diverse, dedicated and skilled employees
 - State government cooperators
 - Customer service reputation for excellence
 - Timeliness, accuracy and relevance
 - Neutrality, credibility and independence
 - Responsiveness to data needs
 - Confidentiality and security
 - Technological efficiencies
 - Data management

Key External Factors

The following external factors could have important implications for NASS's program in the next decade:

- Globalization;
- Population increase, demographic changes and economic growth;
- Changing structure of agriculture, including continued concentration in production leading to fewer but larger vertically integrated and specialized farms;
- Emerging forces influencing agricultural policy such as food safety, consumer preferences, food security, energy requirements, terrorism, nutrition, environmental quality and trade;
- Declining voluntary cooperation and more requests for information;
- Rising expectations from the public for accurate, timely and relevant statistics;
- Fewer employees with a background and education in agriculture;
- Changing lifestyles in rural America, including more off-farm work and declining influence of the agricultural sector in rural communities; and
- Explosive changes in information technology.

Producers must be able to adapt to a more market-oriented farm policy, shifting trade opportunities, and changes in the structure of agriculture such as vertical integration and concentration. Accurate and timely statistical data and economic analysis will help producers and policymakers respond quickly to economic, social and environmental changes that affect the production and sale of agricultural products, both domestically and globally.

In collecting data, we must use innovative methods, such as Web-based data collection and computer-assisted personal interviewing, to help reduce survey respondent burden and improve voluntary cooperation. We must adopt advances in information technologies to increase electronic information sharing, meet increasing demands for new information, increase employee productivity, and continue to meet the public's high expectation. In doing so, we will employ a diverse, highly technical, competent, high-performing workforce able to fully utilize all available resources to provide top-quality agricultural statistics and service.

Strategic Plan Framework

NASS strategic goals align with the strategic goals, major program policies, and objectives of both USDA and the Research, Education and Economics mission area. In addition, the plan focuses on developing strategies for managing human capital, financial management, and budget and performance integration, which also align with USDA's and the REE mission area's strategic goals.

NASS's five strategic goals mirror our commitment to provide first-class service, state-of-the-art science, and consistent management excellence. Planning, sound management, and results measurement are an inherent part of achieving the goals and the seven key objectives NASS has identified. Table 1 shows the NASS goals and objectives in relation to USDA strategic goals.

Table 1. NASS Strategic Goals Align with USDA Goals

USDA Strategic Goal 1: Assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self sustaining, repopulating and economically thriving	NASS Strategic Goal 1: Enhance the Competitiveness and Sustainability of Rural and Farm Economies
	Obj 1.1. Provide statistical data to promote efficient agricultural production and marketing systems
	Obj. 1.2. Provide statistical data and financial tools to help farmers and ranchers manage risk
	Obj.1.3. Provide statistical data on new agricultural markets
	NASS Strategic Goal 2: Create Growth Opportunities in Rural America
	Obj. 2.1. Conduct the census of agriculture to provide statistically sound information to expand economic opportunities
USDA Strategic Goal 2: Ensure our national forests and private working lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate change, while enhancing our water resources	NASS Strategic Goal 3: Help Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment
	Obj. 3.1. Provide statistical data to support management of productive working cropland
USDA Strategic Goal 3: Help America promote agricultural production and biotechnology exports as America works to increase food security	NASS Strategic Goal 4: Support International Economic Development and Trade Capacity Building
	Obj. 4.1. Provide technical assistance to improve agricultural statistics in developing and transitioning countries
USDA Strategic Goal 4: Ensure that all of America's children have access to safe, nutritious and balanced meals	NASS Strategic Goal 5: Support a Safe U.S. Food Supply and Agricultural Production
	Obj. 5.1. Provide chemical usage statistics to enable informed, science-based decisions

Additionally, six management initiatives undertaken by the Administrator and the senior executive team will improve NASS's high level of service by changing the way NASS conducts its business:

- Centralize the agency's computer network and services
- Modernize technology and systems
- Implement computer-assisted personal interviewing
- Centralize key operations
- Implement video conferencing throughout the agency
- Expand investment in research and development

NASS supports USDA civil rights and cultural transformation priorities through five initiatives:

- Engage employees in cultural transformation
- Manage employee development effectively
- Make civil rights accountability and commitment central to the agency
- Recruit and retain an inclusive, diverse, high-performing workforce
- Focus on customers and enhance community outreach

The following pages discuss NASS's goals, objectives and performance measures; the management initiatives through which NASS is transforming its business process; and the agency's commitment to civil rights and cultural transformation.



Strategic Goal 1:

Enhance the Competitiveness and Sustainability of Rural and Farm Economies

USDA is the leading advocate for rural America. The Department supports rural communities and enhances quality of life for rural residents by improving their economic opportunities, community infrastructure, environmental health, and the sustainability of agricultural production. The goal is to create thriving rural communities where people want to live and raise families and children have economic opportunities and a bright future.

The economic vitality and quality of life in rural America depend on a financially healthy agricultural system and access to agricultural markets. The country's farmers help ensure that America and many other parts of the world have nutritious and safe food, adequate energy sources, and fiber products sufficient to meet the needs of our rapidly growing population.

USDA works to ensure American farmers and ranchers are competitive and that producers have access to new and international markets, adequate support in times of economic or environmental distress, and the ability to manage their risks. It strives to provide agricultural producers with an adequate safety net comprised of necessary risk management tools, disaster assistance, and prompt and equitable assistance for farmers, ranchers and eligible landowners.

USDA encourages producers to be good stewards of their land so American agricultural production is economically and environmentally sustainable, as well as socially beneficial. To achieve this goal, USDA focuses on asset- and data-driven

investment decisions coupled with strategic place-based decision making.

Objective 1.1— Provide Statistical Data to Promote Efficient Agricultural Production and Marketing Systems

To help make rural America profitable, NASS must deliver high-quality, objective, relevant, timely and accurate statistics that enable producers and other data users to make sound, informed production and marketing decisions. Official agricultural statistics promote a level playing field in production agriculture, with impartial information available to all at a predetermined and publicized date and time. The Agricultural Statistics Board (ASB) releases a calendar each year with the scheduled date and release time for each report.

NASS provides timely and accurate market-sensitive data that help commodity and agricultural markets operate efficiently by maintaining a fair and equitable environment for price discovery. The information helps USDA policymakers and Congress make informed decisions and policies that promote and contribute to a strong, sustainable U.S. farm and rural economy. Analysts use the statistical data to project trends, interpret the trends' economic implications, and evaluate alternative courses of action for producers, agribusinesses and policymakers. These analyses multiply the impact of NASS statistics.

Statistical information on acreage, production, stocks, prices, and value is essential for the smooth operation of Federal farm programs. It is also indispensable for planning and administering related Federal and State programs in consumer protection, conservation and environmental quality, trade, education and recreation. Moreover, regularly updating the information helps to ensure an orderly flow of goods and services among agriculture's production, processing and marketing sectors. Reliable, timely and detailed crop and livestock statistics help to maintain a stable economic climate and minimize the uncertainties and risks associated with the production, marketing and distribution of commodities.

Farmers and ranchers rely on NASS reports in making production and marketing decisions. The reports help them decide on specific production plans, such as how much corn to plant, how many cattle to raise, and when to buy or sell agricultural commodities. The transportation sector, warehouse and storage companies, banks and other lending institutions, commodity traders, and food processors rely on NASS estimates and forecasts. Agribusinesses that provide farmers with seeds, equipment, chemicals, and other goods and services study the reports when planning their marketing strategies.

NASS carries out its many surveys with support from State departments of agriculture, land-grant universities, community-based organizations, and the agriculture industry through a series of cooperative agreements that enable NASS to collect detailed data on commodities important to local economies, county estimates, and other items not covered by Federal funds. Through its network of field offices, NASS works closely with producer organizations in the States.

The cooperative programs prevent duplication

of effort in acquiring data from operators and in producing estimates of States' agricultural production; they also enhance NASS's effectiveness in gathering State information. They serve U.S. agriculture well by generating a great deal of information at minimal cost, reducing the burden on survey respondents, and helping to maintain consistency in estimates produced by various public agencies.

NASS's statistics and census programs are complemented by its statistical research and service program, which works to improve statistical survey methodology and to test advanced technology for timely and cost-efficient production of high-quality agricultural statistics. Agencies across USDA use NASS statistics in their program analysis and policy development, as well as in their annual performance measures.

The annual Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) jointly sponsored with the Economic Research Service (ERS) is USDA's primary vehicle for obtaining information on a broad range of issues about the farm sector, including financial condition and agricultural resource use. ARMS provides the most definitive annual description of the rapidly changing structure of the nation's farms. As the number of farms declines and the size of some farms increases, large farms account for a growing proportion of agricultural production; at the same time, other farms maintain profitability by entering into production and marketing agreements with agribusinesses. The survey provides an annual measure of the effect such contracts have on farm income. Without ARMS, important measures such as farm income, farm operator income, and farm household income would not be available.

ARMS data are essential for analyzing the effect government programs such as loan deficiency

payments have on net farm income by size and type of farm. Equally important, ARMS data help in evaluating the differential impact of various policies and programs across the farm sector and among farm families.

Farm organizations, commodity groups, agribusinesses, Congress and USDA use ARMS data to evaluate the financial performance of farm and ranch businesses and to make policy decisions affecting agriculture. The Bureau of Economic Analysis uses ARMS data to calculate the farm sector portion of the nation's gross domestic product. The survey addresses policy questions relevant to resource use as well as financial issues. ARMS data support evaluations of the relationships among agricultural production, resources and the environment. The particular commodities surveyed rotate every five or six years.

NASS has begun research to develop model-based estimates that incorporate survey, administrative and other data sources as appropriate. The goal is to publish survey and model-based estimates as methodology and systems become available. Measures of error will be published, and survey methods, estimation and modeling procedures will be transparent and available.

To strengthen the long-term viability of the farm sector, NASS and FFA (formerly called Future Farmers of America) have partnered to develop new educational tools to help promote agricultural and statistical literacy among kindergarten through 12th-grade students. The materials help teachers convey the importance of statistics, the kind of information statistics can provide, and the specific trends and changes affecting U.S. agricultural production, rural communities and society as a whole. Using census of agriculture data, the classroom-ready lesson plans and supporting materials align with national

curriculum standards for science, math and social studies.

Performance Measures

- Release ASB reports containing data used to produce economic indicators on time at least 98 percent of the time. Baseline 2009 – 100.0 percent.
- Release all other ASB reports on time at least 95 percent of the time. Baseline 2009 – 99.8 percent.
- Issue errata for fewer than 5 percent of ASB reports.

Strategies and Means

To ensure statistical data are available to promote efficient domestic agricultural production and marketing systems, NASS will:

- Conduct timely, statistically reliable surveys and field visits to enable the Agricultural Statistics Board to forecast crop production, estimate livestock inventories and prices, and respond to emergency data needs such as those resulting from floods, droughts and freezes;
- Systematically analyze each step of data collection, processing and statistical estimation using the ASB process to provide unbiased official USDA estimates;
- Promote a more efficient approach to survey coordination and electronic data collection by centralizing data collection activities, standardizing survey instruments and processes, and increasing the use of technology;
- Implement sampling and data collection strategies that deal effectively with changes in farm structure;
- Issue timely, accurate, user-friendly reports of official estimates that contribute to efficient and effective marketing of U.S. agricultural products;
- Ensure that internal policies and procedures

- continue to support on-time release of over 500 national reports each year;
- Publicize the NASS release policy and the annual release calendar to the public;
 - Release crop forecasts within 12 days of the survey reference date. Release livestock inventories and crop acreages within 30 days of the survey reference date;
 - Publish measures of error and document the methodology used to help data users better understand the data;
 - Address the needs of local data users and customers through our network of State field offices and our cooperative relationships with universities and State departments of agriculture;
 - Develop and maintain online graphical products and current and historical databases;
 - Safeguard the privacy of farmers, ranchers and other data providers, with a guarantee that confidentiality and data security continue to be our top priorities;
 - Research opportunities to reduce the burden on respondents and save data collection costs through expanded use of administrative data and alternative data collection strategies;
 - Invest in research to increase the transparency and replicability of the NASS estimates program;
 - Enhance NASS's capacity to conduct and gain access to research to support its operational programs;
 - Conduct periodic internal and external reviews to ensure NASS programs remain relevant and use proper statistical methods;
 - Utilize the NASS Advisory Committee, outside review teams, and data user forums to periodically evaluate NASS programs and products for relevance and usefulness; and
 - Continue to expand interaction and strengthen partnerships with other government agencies, external stakeholders,

Congress, industry groups and other organizations.

Objective 1.2 — Provide Statistical Data and Financial Tools to Help Farmers and Ranchers Manage Risk

NASS produces and disseminates county- and local-level statistics and price information that helps U.S. producers manage the inherently risky environment of agricultural production. Agricultural production and marketability are constantly affected by unpredictable factors such as weather and growing conditions, disease and pest outbreaks, and consumer purchasing power. NASS data help producers manage the uncertainty and support USDA efforts to ensure farmers' profitability.

USDA's Risk Management Agency relies on NASS annual county estimates to administer crop insurance programs that provide U.S. farmers with safety net protection against unpredictable growing conditions. Additionally, USDA's Farm Service Agency relies on NASS county-level data to determine program payments for several conservation-based initiatives such as the Conservation Reserve Program, crop revenue support programs, and emergency assistance payments.

The County Estimates Survey program was initially designed, administered and processed at the local level by NASS field offices supporting State cooperative agreements with local governments or universities. As local-level funding evaporated and data uses expanded to support USDA-administered farm programs, it became apparent that NASS needs consistent standards across all field offices. Consequently, NASS is developing the infrastructure to support the transition to a nationally administered County

Estimates Survey program. Initial work focused on internal processes and tools that support analyses and estimation; more recently work has shifted toward ensuring consistency in sampling, design and program execution.

The new County Estimates Survey design achieves efficiencies, improves quality, and reduces the burden on respondents. Smaller sample sizes require follow-up with non-respondents to achieve an 80 percent response rate. Survey processing and estimation tools will be further developed and enhanced to establish the robust and flexible processing system required to obtain the crop and production practices data needed to administer USDA programs.

To improve the accuracy of the data, NASS is researching small-area statistical techniques for crop estimates, including geospatial tools, to address challenges stemming from changing farm structures and requests for more detailed data. NASS is looking for effective ways to leverage USDA and other external county-level data sources in order to reduce the burden on our nation's farmers and ranchers to respond to multiple requests for information.

NASS has already improved efficiency and reduced the respondent burden by eliminating the need to collect data for county-level livestock estimates. NASS developed and tested a statistical ranking/calibration procedure that produces reliable county-level estimates by leveraging census of agriculture data and data collected from annual sample surveys that measure State and national-level estimates. This makes the program more efficient and creates savings for American taxpayers.

NASS also teamed with the Farm Service Agency to successfully implement the 2008 Farm Bill requirement to provide reliable county-level

cash rents data in support of the Conservation Reserve Program. This statistically sound, science-based approach led to a reduction in USDA rental payment outlays. The Cash Rents Survey is conducted annually in all 50 States; it provides the basis for county estimates of the current year's cash rent paid for irrigated cropland, non-irrigated cropland, and pasture for counties with at least 20,000 acres of cropland plus pasture. The target population is all farms and ranches that have historically rented land on a cash basis for any of these three land use categories. Land rented on any of the following bases is excluded from the survey: share of the crop; fees per head, per pound of gain, or per animal unit month; on a "whole farm" basis (i.e., including buildings such as greenhouses or dairy barns); and free of charge.

USDA relies on cash rental rate data to determine market-based rates in administering the Conservation Reserve Program and other programs that benefit farmers and their communities. The survey helps ensure that producers receive program payments that accurately reflect market conditions in their community. Other Federal agencies, State governments, universities, and research organizations use the data for various economic analyses, and farmers use them in negotiating rental agreements and making future business decisions.

The NASS Prices Received Survey estimates prices farmers and ranchers receive for crop and livestock commodities. For example, the survey data help determine prices received indexes and parity prices. NASS ensures price indexes are publicly available for all Farm Bill commodities eligible for a marketing loan or a USDA program payment. USDA agencies use the indexes to design and manage a variety of farm and financial safety net programs. The Farm Service Agency uses the data when determining counter cyclical and disaster

payments, and the Risk Management Agency uses them for insurance programs. The Economic Research Service and the Federal Reserve Bank use the prices received indexes as a general measure of commodity price changes.

NASS uses price estimates to determine the value of agricultural production, as well as to calculate key economic indicators for the farm sector (e.g., farm income, commodity costs and returns, and farm sector productivity), U.S. and world supply and demand estimates, and the parity ratio. ERS and the Department of Commerce use NASS price statistics in computing commodity cash receipts and net farm income, a major component in the national income accounts. The Forest Service determines annual grazing fees for use of National Forest System lands based on NASS grazing rate prices. State governments use the data for land valuations and taxation purposes. Farmers, ranchers and agribusinesses use the data series in financial management and marketing decisions.

Performance Measure

- Provide county-level statistics for at least the seven major Risk Management Agency-insured commodities by scheduled due dates at least 95 percent of the time. Baseline 2009 – 100.0 percent.

Strategies and Means

To improve the effectiveness of risk management and financial tools provided to U.S. agricultural producers, NASS will:

- Deploy new sampling strategies that utilize smaller, more-targeted samples but still have sufficient coverage to generate reliable county-level estimates;
- Use an integrated, efficient approach to data collection to reduce the respondent burden, streamline survey processes, and permit targeted follow-up in low-response counties;
- Coordinate official release dates for

county-level crop estimates with the Risk Management Agency;

- Utilize new, innovative estimation and modeling tools that promote efficient sampling, reduce the burden and the number of future contacts, and capture estimates for small areas other than State or county;
- Provide flexible and adaptable survey processing systems that allow integration of other data needs or expansion of commodity coverage;
- Evaluate trends and changes in production agriculture and adjust which States to include in U.S. market year average price calculations and the County Estimates Survey Program;
- Ensure quality price indexes are publicly available for all Farm Bill commodities eligible for marketing loans or USDA program payments;
- Supply USDA agencies with timely and accurate statistical information to use in calculating payments to farmers in accordance with the 2008 Farm Bill;
- Provide statistics that help USDA shape farm price support policies to increase farm and rural prosperity and support viable business opportunities for beginning farmers, racial and ethnic minority farmers, and women producers;
- Provide data to help agricultural producers and agribusinesses make informed decisions in response to changing market conditions; and
- Provide current, unbiased price and sales information to assist in marketing and distributing farm commodities.

Objective 1.3 — Provide Statistical Data on New Agricultural Markets

To remain financially sustainable, producers must continually identify and access new domestic markets. USDA provides support in developing

opportunities through market trend analysis and business and marketing tools, including overseeing national standards for the production and handling of organic agricultural products. Goods certified as organic frequently bring higher prices at market and therefore better returns for farmers.

The 2008 Farm Bill provided one-time funding for NASS to develop statistics on organically produced agricultural products. NASS conducted the Organic Production Survey in 2009 to develop baseline statistics about this quickly expanding and vital sector of U.S. agriculture. Survey statistics included: organic production; production practices, including pest management, cover crops, crop rotation, rotational grazing, conservation tillage, water management and buffer zones; production expenses; marketing practices, including wholesale, retail, and direct-to-consumer sales; and value-added production and processing. Results from the 2009 Organic Production Survey were released in February 2010.

NASS is implementing a comprehensive data series on organic production, handling and distribution that builds on the 2009 survey. An ongoing organic statistics program will ensure the continued growth and sustainability of organic production in the United States by helping shape decisions regarding farm policy, funding allocations, availability of goods and services, community development, and many other key issues. In addition, survey results can help organic farmers and ranchers make informed decisions about the future of their operation.

Farmers and ranchers are responding to increased consumer demand for locally produced food by increasing the production and sale of commodities, particularly specialty commodities, at the local level. NASS is responding to the needs of these agricultural producers by providing data the industry needs for marketing and planning.

NASS produced a specialty crop publication containing national and State-level data as part of its 2007 Census of Agriculture subject series. A specialty crop is defined by law as fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and nursery crops (including floriculture). Because some USDA agencies consider maple syrup an additional specialty crop, NASS provided data both including and excluding maple syrup to accommodate either definition. This is the first time NASS has summarized and published the census of agriculture data for specialty crops. The publication has been well received by data users.

In fiscal year 2010, NASS conducted a census of horticultural specialties to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of the horticultural sector of the U.S. economy. The census provides the only source of detailed production and sales data for floriculture, nursery and other specialty crops. For this census, an operation was defined as any place that grew and sold \$10,000 or more of horticultural specialty products during the census year. The agriculture industry and all levels of government use the information to prepare a wide variety of horticulture-related programs, economic models, legislative initiatives, market analyses, and feasibility studies. These programs directly affect the life and communities of growers and help to improve horticultural technologies and practices.

Performance Measure

- Meet established survey release dates for organics and specialty commodities at least 95 percent of the time.
Baseline – organics – 100.0 percent.
Baseline – specialty commodities – 100.0 percent.

Strategies and Means

To ensure statistical data are available for emerging agricultural markets, NASS will:

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- Develop and maintain an organic agriculture statistics program to monitor the continued growth, evolution and understanding of this sector;
 - Issue a specialty crop publication following the 2012 Census of Agriculture;
 - Provide statistics for emerging market commodities to help USDA foster new opportunities for farmers and ranchers; and
 - Collaborate with other USDA agencies to utilize existing data sources for emerging market commodities in order to reduce respondent burden, save data collection costs, and limit duplication across agencies.

External Risk Factors

- Annual progress toward NASS goals and outcomes depends on the continued willingness of farmers, ranchers and

agribusinesses to voluntarily provide information. If NASS responds to the growing number of requests from within and outside USDA for more data series and more county-level data, the burden on respondents will increase, potentially triggering lower response rates and therefore less reliable data.

- Collecting and preparing large volumes of agricultural data involves multiple stakeholders and deadlines. Delayed data collection from respondents and unanticipated technical or other difficulties negatively impact timeliness.
- Increasing survey costs during a time of declining budgets may necessitate reductions in survey sample sizes and coverage, which would adversely impact the quality of official statistics.

Strategic Goal 2:

Create Growth Opportunities in Rural America

USDA helps maintain economic stability in the agricultural sector, enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of farm economies. The Department strives to provide producers a backstop of prompt and equitable assistance, risk management tools, direct and counter-cyclical income payments, disaster assistance, and marketing assistance loans to farmers, ranchers and eligible landowners. USDA also partners with commercial lenders to guarantee farm ownership and operating loans, and makes direct loans to producers to purchase property or finance farm operating expenses.

USDA efforts support the long-term viability of the U.S. agricultural system by providing Federal leadership in creating and disseminating knowledge spanning the biological, physical and social sciences related to agricultural research, economic analysis, statistics, extension and higher education. Cooperative efforts with other U.S. Government agencies and U.S. industry ensure that America's farmers and livestock producers have fair market access, a strong understanding of key market trends, and support in overcoming market barriers.

Objective 2.1— Conduct the Census of Agriculture to Provide Statistically Sound Information to Expand Economic Opportunities

NASS conducts the census of agriculture every five years and provides a comprehensive data series at the national, State and county levels. The data give a snapshot of the agriculture

economy, including number and size of farms, farm typology, characteristics of farm operators, land use, production expenses, value of land and buildings, market value of agricultural production sold, acreage of hundreds of crops, inventory of livestock and poultry, farming practices including irrigation, and marketing and utilization of government-sponsored programs. Census data include the U.S. territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, Northern Mariana Islands and U.S. Virgin Islands.

Other Federal agencies, State and local governments, agribusinesses, and many others who provide services to farmers and rural communities use census of agriculture data. Detailed county-level information is critical for new agribusinesses in developing local-level strategies and plans to successfully startup or relocate in rural America. Census data also serve as the basis for formulating farm programs and policies, including the Farm Bill. The results of the census must be reported in a timely and user-friendly manner to ensure they are useful and relevant. Participation in the census is required by law, which also protects the confidentiality of all individual responses. The 2007 Census of Agriculture marked the first census to allow respondents to report electronically via the Internet, thereby maximizing reporting flexibility for today's busy farmers and ranchers.

To ensure its programs are representative and inclusive, NASS reaches out to traditionally underrepresented populations—including minority, women, socially disadvantaged, tribal, and beginning farm operators—to improve

coverage in the agriculture census. This involves maintaining partnerships with State departments of agriculture, land-grant colleges and universities, local program supporters, industry, and other partners to assist in program development and evaluation.

NASS partners with tribal nations and more than 40 community-based organizations to ensure the census mailing list covers their constituencies and to provide hands-on assistance and support to local producers—including non-English speakers—in filling out their census forms. NASS targets its media outreach efforts toward print and broadcast outlets that reach small, minority, and non-English-speaking producers. After the 2007 Census of Agriculture, NASS issued two publications on agricultural activity on American Indian reservations. NASS continues to work with its CBO partners to review results from the 2007 census and to develop a framework to improve the accuracy of demographic data in the 2012 census.

Through a cooperative agreement with three Texas CBOs (the Texas-Mexico Border Coalition, the Land Owners Association of Texas, and the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers Association), NASS is developing a Partnership Handbook to help CBOs understand the census process, the importance of their participation, and how they can best partner with NASS on census activities. The handbook will also help directors of NASS field offices in developing partnerships with CBOs in their States.

NASS's census program supports USDA programs that require demographic, ethnic and racial information on farm operators. Census profiles contain county-level census data presented by the race, ethnicity and gender of farm operators. Without providing personally identifiable information, the county-level profiles offer an easily accessed snapshot of farm demographics at the county level and insight into understanding

rural America. The data sets are available on the NASS Web site and on www.data.gov.

Planning for the 2012 census is well under way. NASS contracted with the Council on Food, Agriculture and Resource Economics to conduct an outside census review panel. The panel's recommendations are being considered by three teams developing plans for the 2012 census. The teams have responsibility for developing the census content, designing the publication, and developing and testing the data collection forms and procedures.

The latter team reviewed the data collected in the 2007 census as well as comments from NASS field offices and other staff to target areas for improvement. Revisions to the form were made and testing was conducted to ensure respondents are able to report the required data accurately. Testing included in-person cognitive interviews and a mail-out of 5,000 forms testing both mail and online reporting. A second round in late 2010 and early 2011 tested the census processing systems and helped finalize the forms and data collection procedures. This iterative approach to testing will help improve the quality of the data collected in the 2012 Census of Agriculture by improving both the initial reporting of census data and subsequent data handling and processing.

Performance Measures

- In the 2012 Census of Agriculture, account for at least 95 percent of U.S. farms and at least 98 percent of the farmland on farms with \$50,000 or more in sales. Baseline 2007 – 95 percent of farms and 98 percent of farmland.
- In the 2012 Census of Agriculture, account for at least 70 percent of limited resource and historically underserved farms. Baseline 2007 – 69 percent.
- Increase the number of Web responses

for the 2012 Census of Agriculture by 10 percent. Baseline 2007 – 96,000 responses.

- Release the 2012 census publication within 15 months after the initial mailing. Baseline 2007 – 14 months.

Strategies and Means

To provide statistically sound information to expand economic opportunities, NASS will:

- Screen all available list sources to ensure only viable farms are added to the census mailing list;
- Continue to partner with community-based organizations and tribes to ensure racially and ethnically diverse populations are counted in the census and that published demographic data meet their needs;
- Develop a NASS-CBO Partnership Handbook to provide guidance on creating productive partnerships in support of the 2012 census;
- Conduct the 2012 Census of Agriculture to provide detailed agriculture sector data at the national, State, county and local levels;
- Analyze each step to ensure the 2012 census process is efficient and results are accurate;
- Report the census results in a timely and user-friendly manner that helps localities across the country in decision making;
- Expand the application of information technology consistently throughout the census process—from online survey response to data processing to development of more online data products;

- Focus census marketing efforts to provide a well-defined package of products that will improve efficiency, increase response rates, and raise public awareness of the value of data generated;
- Provide data users with measures of coverage, response rates, and other indicators of quality so they can interpret the data and assess the data's usefulness and appropriateness; and
- Evaluate trends and changes in production agriculture based on the census findings and adjust the NASS statistics program accordingly.

External Risk Factors

- Insufficient funds to conduct a comprehensive census of agriculture every five years would jeopardize the many policy and funding decisions based on census data.
- If marketing efforts are not appropriately directed to minority and other underrepresented farmers and ranchers, the census may not adequately represent this segment of the agriculture industry.
- In conducting the census of agriculture, NASS faces countless challenges, both technical and conceptual. These include the wide range of often competing uses and demands for the data, the ever-changing nature and structure of the agricultural sector, dramatic changes in information technology, and the resource constraints inherent in governmental efforts.

Strategic Goal 3:

Help Protect and Enhance the Nation's Natural Resource Base and Environment

America's prosperity is inextricably linked to the health of our land and natural resources. Forests, farms, ranches and grasslands offer enormous environmental benefits as a source of clean air, clean and abundant water, and wildlife habitat. These lands generate economic value by supporting the vital agriculture and forestry sectors, attracting tourism and recreation visitors, sustaining green jobs, and producing ecosystem services, food, fiber, timber and non-timber products, and energy. They are also of immense social importance, enhancing rural quality of life, sustaining scenic and culturally important landscapes, and providing opportunities to engage in outdoor activity and reconnect with the land.

USDA plays a pivotal role in protecting and restoring America's forests, farms, ranches and grasslands while making them more resilient to threats and enhancing natural resources. The Department partners with private landowners to help protect the nation's 1.3 billion acres of farm, ranch and private forestlands. As public land stewards, USDA works to conserve and restore 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands in the National Forest System. The Department also partners with Federal, tribal and State governments and nongovernmental organizations to assist land and natural resource managers and connect people to the nation's magnificent lands.

USDA works with farmers, ranchers and others to conserve and restore private wetland, cropland, wildlife habitat and riparian areas. The Department's partnerships with farmers, ranchers and communities create corridors for wildlife,

prevent and reduce impacts from flooding or other extreme weather events, and support the creation of green space for rural recreational use.

USDA is committed to provide technical support and analysis to enhance water conservation and restore watershed health, as well as to increase research and development efforts to support water conservation. Protecting America's supply of clean and abundant water is among the most crucial environmental challenges of the twenty-first century. Water is essential for life. This precious resource is the foundation for healthy ecosystems, sustainable agricultural and forest production, livable communities, and viable industry. Farmers, ranchers and forest landowners play a pivotal role in protecting and enhancing water resources.

Objective 3.1— Provide Statistical Data to Support Management of Productive Working Cropland

NASS programs and products generate detailed data that policymakers and producers use in identifying and managing the resource base on which American agriculture depends.

NASS has used remote sensing to enhance its crop acreage estimates since the 1970s, when satellite imagery was first used as a major input in constructing the nation's area sampling frame—the statistical foundation for collecting agricultural estimates with complete coverage of American agriculture. The Cropland Data Layer (CDL) is the agency's core remote sensing product; it provides

crop-specific land cover information and serves as the basis of acreage and yield estimates. The CDL shows the type and location of crops planted in a particular season using low-cost and free mid-resolution satellite imagery, access to high-quality ground truth, and efficient and robust classification software. In 2009, NASS produced its first 48-State CDL. NASS is conducting research to expand the number of State/crop combinations and increase the frequency of acreage estimates.

The CDL is a popular and freely available data layer that most geographic information systems (GIS) can access, analyze and integrate with other information. It is useful in land cover, animal habitat, and watershed monitoring; soils utilization analysis; agribusiness planning; addressing biodiversity, crop intensity, and agricultural sustainability concerns; and the remote sensing and GIS value-added industry.

In 2011, NASS will launch CropScape, a new Web dissemination geospatial portal that will enhance the CDL's usability and accessibility. This state-of-the-art portal will link statistics, agriculture, and space and will feature Web-based tools such as an interactive map, data dissemination, and geospatial queries and automated data delivery. Built using Open Geospatial Consortium standards, CropScape will be available to anyone with an Internet browser and will provide access to all CDLs created since 1997.

Looking to the future, NASS is conducting research on crop progress and condition under a National Aeronautical and Space Administration grant in cooperation with George Mason University. Additionally, we are seeking research cooperators for soil moisture and disaster monitoring. This research would improve the objectivity and spatial resolution of currently produced data and add information supporting economic and policy analysis to help agriculture

mitigate and adapt to climate variability.

Other NASS work also supports the sustainable management of working land.

- Following release of the 2007 Census of Agriculture, NASS issued a watershed report presenting the census data by 6-digit hydrologic unit code (HUC). This valuable tool highlights number of farms, land in farms, cropland harvested, irrigated areas, acres treated with fertilizer and chemicals, selected crop acreage, organic acreage, selected livestock inventory, and many other indicators.
- The NASS Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey (FRIS) provides detailed data relating to on-farm irrigation activities. FRIS is a follow-on survey to the census of agriculture, occurring every five years in the year after the census. The data are reported at national, State and watershed levels. They are the only data complete, consistent and accurate enough to use in benchmarking on-farm irrigation measures over time. FRIS data contribute to water-related programs, economic models, legislative initiatives, market analyses, and feasibility studies. The information helps industry representatives, leaders, and planners chart the best course for future on-farm irrigation.
- The Agricultural Resource Management Survey helps in studying water quality issues. ARMS provides data on production practices such as machinery use and crop rotation to help identify tillage systems and crop residue levels affecting soil erosion.

Performance Measures

- Produce the Cropland Data Layer for all 48 contiguous States and increase the spatial resolution from 56 meters to 30 meters. Baseline 2009 – 56 meters.

- Expand remote sensing acreage estimation to 140 State/crop combinations using new estimation techniques. Baseline 2009 – 92 State/crop combinations.
- Expand remote sensing yield estimation research to cover all 10 speculative corn States and continue research on soybean and wheat yield estimation. Baseline 2009 – 5 corn States.
- Create a new Web portal to provide state-of-the-art access to the CDL. Baseline – CDL only available for customers to download into their GIS.
- Summarize the 2012 Census of Agriculture by 6-digit hydrologic unit code for 38 individual land characteristics and publish results within 4 months after the census is released. Baseline 2007 – 4 months.

Strategies and Means

To assist in protecting and enhancing the nation’s natural resource base and environment, NASS will:

- Evaluate trends and changes in production agriculture and adjust the content and geospatial programs of the Farm and Ranch Irrigation and the Agricultural Resource Management surveys accordingly;
- Provide CDL dissemination portal for all 48 contiguous States;
- Develop a Web-accessible geospatial portal for crop progress and condition data;

- Publish the census watershed report following the 2012 Census of Agriculture;
- Conduct the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey in 2013 to obtain needed information concerning irrigation practices, water quality issues, and production practices affecting soil erosion;
- Continue research that increases knowledge about how climate variability impacts forests, crops and range ecosystems;
- Conduct research on collecting crop information using satellite mapping data to create CDLs suitable for use in GIS applications;
- Conduct research and explore geographic information system, remote sensing, and other scientific and technological advances to enhance the quality, accuracy and consistency of statistics; and
- Expand collaboration with other public and private entities to combine GIS layers in new ways to expand the value of NASS products.

External Risk Factors

- If NASS does not receive funding to continue the remote sensing research, NASS may have to scale back the effort.
- If Congress does not allocate funds for water and irrigation surveys on a regular basis, NASS cannot provide the Department and others this useful data series.

Strategic Goal 4:

Support International Economic Development and Trade Capacity Building

A productive agricultural sector is critical to increasing global food security. For many crops, a substantial portion of domestic production is bound for overseas markets. USDA helps American farmers and ranchers use efficient, sustainable production, biotechnology, and other emergent technologies to enhance food security around the world and find export markets for their products. USDA invests in capacity building, technical assistance, and agricultural research to promote economic growth and increase agricultural production in developing countries. The Department also promotes agricultural policy and trade practices that enhance global food security, stabilize governments and societies, and enhance sustainable economic growth in developing countries.

The Department is working to ensure U.S. agricultural resources contribute to enhanced global food security, enhance America's ability to develop and trade agricultural products derived from new technologies, and promote sustainable and productive agricultural systems that enable food-insecure nations to feed themselves. American agricultural resources and expertise play a significant role in increasing global food security by promoting technology- and science-based solutions and capacity-building activities in other countries.

Objective 4.1— Provide Technical Assistance to Improve Agricultural Statistics in Developing and Transitioning Countries

NASS is recognized as the world leader in the field of agricultural statistics. In addition to producing high-quality statistics about U.S. agriculture, NASS has helped establish and improve agricultural statistics systems in countries around the world since the end of World War II. Food insecurity, shortfalls in regional food production, and lack of reliable information on the agricultural sector are major concerns in many countries. Improved agricultural data systems can provide more and better information to address these issues.

NASS works with the U.S. Agency for International Development and other Federal agencies to provide technical assistance and training on a reimbursable basis in all aspects of statistical surveys and data systems to improve and expand a developing or transitioning country's capacity to produce agricultural statistics and information. The goal is to develop stronger statistical organizations and increase the skills of individual employees. NASS emphasizes continuity and the consistent use of statistically sound procedures, so that more reliable and timely agricultural information can be provided at less cost. Education and technology transfer help bring these methods to developing and transitioning countries; economic and statistical research help determine the extent to which technology transfer improves incomes or increases trade.

Providing such assistance benefits the United States as well. By helping other countries improve their agricultural statistics systems, USDA improves its ability to assess world food and fiber production. In today's global economy, timely

and accurate supply statistics for fair and efficient price discovery in the global market are critical. Establishing strong working relationships with other agricultural statisticians around the world allows NASS staff to gather and develop new ideas for improving the U.S. agricultural statistics system, while exposure to other cultures and work situations enhances NASS employees' abilities to solve problems.

NASS's international projects have covered the globe and a wide array of statistical activities, including:

- Reviewing existing and developing new sample survey and census programs;
- Developing area and list sampling frames;
- Designing more efficient survey samples;
- Testing and implementing new and improved survey methods;
- Developing data processing systems;
- Developing objective crop yield forecasting and estimating programs;
- Introducing new methods for analyzing survey data;
- Consulting on the use of remote sensing technology; and
- Delivering short-term seminars and training programs, both in-country and in the United States.

Over the past 10 years, NASS international projects helped more than 30 developing and emerging market countries in Africa, Central and South America, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe develop and improve agricultural statistics programs. During the same period, NASS hosted foreign visitors from nearly 100 countries, averaging 150 visitors per year.

NASS currently provides technical assessments, assistance or training to improve agricultural statistics programs in thirteen countries. Short-term assignments support work in Afghanistan,

Armenia, Georgia, Ghana, Haiti, Moldova, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Serbia, South Africa and Tanzania. The technical assistance ranges from basic survey concepts and procedures to complete national census of agriculture support.

NASS's Administrator and the NASS International Programs Office were actively involved in developing the United Nations Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics, a multilateral effort to strengthen and raise the public profile of agricultural statistics. The strategy was developed in response to a United Nations Statistical Commission report highlighting that agricultural and rural statistics are essential for policymaking and that strategic direction is needed to meet the increasing demand for information at both international and country levels, especially in light of the recent food crisis. The report also emphasized the important role of agricultural ministries and other institutions in compiling agricultural statistics and coordinating national statistical offices and councils. NASS is helping to develop an action plan to implement the global strategy and is working with international organizations to put the strategy in place in several countries.

Performance Measure

- Provide technical assistance to 100 percent of countries that request assistance whenever funding is available to reimburse NASS for actual costs. Baseline 2009 – 100 percent.

Strategies and Means

To support international economic development and trade capacity building, NASS will:

- Help developing and transitioning countries build credible statistical systems to monitor agriculture sector performance, formulate agricultural policies, implement agricultural programs, and improve market intelligence on

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- country and global agricultural production;
 - Pursue leads for new projects in developing and transitioning countries, as well as funding sources to support new and existing agricultural statistics improvement programs;
 - Expand cooperation with developed-country statistical agencies to improve international understanding of data and methodology and help develop appropriate common classifications, methods and procedures;
 - Participate in international forums where NASS capabilities can be demonstrated;
 - Continue to provide leadership on the United Nations Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics;

- Conduct briefings and training for international visitors and collaborators that demonstrate NASS's ability to provide technical and international assistance; and
- Enlist NASS domestic program technical staff to assist with international projects.

External Risk Factors

- NASS's ability to provide technical assistance and training for agricultural statistics in developing countries is limited by the countries' lack of resources and limited international donor funding for capacity building.

Strategic Goal 5:

Support a Safe U.S. Food Supply and Agricultural Production

A plentiful supply of safe and nutritious food is essential to the well-being of every family and the healthy development of every child in America. USDA supports and protects the nation's agricultural system and the consumers it serves. The Department safeguards the quality and wholesomeness of meat, poultry and egg products. USDA provides nutrition assistance to children and low-income people who need it and addresses and prevents loss and damage from pests and disease outbreaks.

USDA also measures industry adoption of functional food defense plans—written procedures that food processing establishments should follow to protect the food supply from intentional contamination with chemicals, biological agents or other harmful substances. Food defense plans help the agriculture industry protect public health and reduce negative economic impacts on the food infrastructure.

Objective 5.1— Provide Chemical Usage Statistics to Enable Informed, Science-Based Decisions

Through various programs and activities, NASS provides data that other Federal agencies, as well as State and local governments, rely on to protect the U.S. food supply, agricultural production and water quality. NASS's agricultural chemical use database is USDA's official source of statistics about on-farm and post-harvest fertilizer and pesticide use and pest management practices. It encompasses surveys looking at chemical use by producers of

fruits, vegetables, field crops, livestock, and other animals and crops. The database also includes post-harvest chemical use, obtained by surveying storage facilities, processors, packers and shippers.

To create the database, NASS surveys fruit and vegetable producers to determine use of fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and other pesticides; each chemical product is classified by its active ingredient. The Fruit Chemical Use Survey is conducted in odd-numbered years and the Vegetable Chemical Use Survey in even-numbered years, with the particular commodities surveyed rotating each time. The data collected include acreage of the targeted commodities grown during the year and treated with chemical applications; the name, amount and method of application of all chemical products applied; and the operation's pest management practices. Fertilizer information is collected during every other survey cycle (every four years).

The Agricultural Resource Management Survey collects data associated with agricultural production practices, resource use, and variable costs of production for specific field crops. Commodities are surveyed on a predetermined rotation, with up to five commodities surveyed in a given year. Farm operators provide data on fertilizer and nutrient applications, pesticide applications, pest management practices, and irrigation. Since 1996, the survey has been conducted in cooperation with the USDA Economic Research Service. The collaboration enables NASS to continue to publish accurate chemical use statistics and ERS to conduct

economic analyses relating to field crop chemical usage and farm financial data. It enhances both agencies' estimation programs by building environmental and economic databases.

Producers are happy to participate in the chemical use surveys because the data consistently show that their use of chemicals is below the tolerance levels and that they are responsible land stewards. A variety of government agencies find the database an invaluable tool, particularly since the 1996 Food Quality Protection Act increased the need for actual, reliable chemical use data. At the Federal level, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration, and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and Economic Research Service use the chemical use data to evaluate the safety of the nation's food supply; assess risks and benefits and determine whether a pesticide is safe enough to allow continued use; and market commodities at the State, national and international level. Similarly, State agencies use the data to determine how well agricultural practices accord with environmental quality standards.

NASS provides statistical expertise to various USDA agencies pursuing a healthy, safe and efficient food supply. We expect these and similar activities to continue. In recent examples, NASS:

- Assisted the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in developing nutrition guidance for the American public based on the 2005 dietary guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- Helped the Pesticide Data Program of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) identify pesticide contamination of food commodities for human consumption; and
- Is working with the AMS Microbiological Data Program to develop a cost-effective way to survey microbial contamination in a timely manner in order to avoid widespread distribution.

Performance Measures

- Exceed the 75 percent standard for acres covered by agricultural chemical and pest management statistics for targeted food crops and commodities. Baseline 2009 – 75 percent.
- Conduct at least one data user meeting annually with a focus on chemical use statistics.

Strategies and Means

To assist USDA in providing a safe U.S. food supply and agricultural production, NASS will:

- Conduct surveys to provide needed information concerning quantities of chemicals applied to agricultural commodities, including livestock and facilities;
- Provide information to help measure the adoption of integrated pest management practices in production agriculture;
- Supply important economic information relevant to policy and production decisions associated with chemical use and integrated pest management on U.S. farms and ranches;
- Evaluate trends in production agriculture and chemical use and adjust the survey program accordingly; and
- Continue to provide consulting services to other USDA programs.

External Risk Factors

- If funding is eliminated for chemical use surveys, the data series will be less useful.
- Because extensive detailed data are needed on chemical use, the survey questionnaire is lengthy, which increases both the burden on respondents and the data collection costs and could decrease response rates.
- Producers currently realize the data they provide help them. If the data use changes and producers feel the data are not helping them, response rates could decrease.

Management Initiatives

Through six key management initiatives, we are transforming our business process for collecting, processing, analyzing and disseminating agricultural statistics.

Initiative I — Centralize the Agency's Computer Network and Services

NASS is migrating from its distributed local area network (LAN) environment to a centralized information technology system in which employees can access applications or systems anywhere and anytime from their desktops, laptops and smart phones. A centralized computer network will allow us to operate more effectively and efficiently, for example, moving some work functions from Headquarters to field offices as needed or having a field office perform work activities for multiple offices.

We anticipate that centralizing and consolidating LAN services will have significant benefits: streamlined administration since fewer employees will be able to perform network support and activities; strengthened security since one rather than almost fifty physical locations will contain servers and electronic personally identifiable information (PII); more reliable data access as a result of online data redundancy; reduced equipment costs as a result of more fully utilizing server capacity; and reduced energy usage stemming from the elimination of servers. The centralized information technology infrastructure will allow our employees to continue to work in the event of a health pandemic, a weather event or a natural or other disaster.

Initiative II — Modernize Technology and Systems

NASS is transitioning toward a centralized database processing environment, which requires overcoming significant barriers to enable all software tools and processes to operate efficiently in the new environment. Creating a centralized database gives us additional important benefits by enabling us to streamline processes; upgrade and standardize tools; and migrate all surveys, estimates and products to the new environment. Some currently used tools will only need a new communication bridge to the centralized databases, while other tools will require complete re-engineering.

Once the transition is complete, we will have a standard series of “services” and tools available to perform all project tasks needed from survey inception to publication of estimates. In addition, the current numerous stand-alone business processes will be minimized. This will not only reduce IT maintenance and employee training on different systems, but will improve the staff's capability to transfer their skills from one survey or commodity to another. The centralized environment will remove barriers to shifting activities among work units in different geographic locations. A major long-term benefit will be an increase in data quality and a reduction in the number of staff needed to complete the work.

Initiative III — Implement Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing

NASS utilizes a variety of methods to collect survey data, including personal interview, mailed (paper) questionnaire, telephone interview, and most recently self-administered Web questionnaire. With declining budgets and increasing data collection costs, we want to collect data more efficiently and effectively and maximize the use of technology. The use of computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) is an important step toward achieving this goal.

CAPI involves an interviewer visiting the respondent to record survey responses using a portable enumeration device. Improved timeliness of the data, a longer data collection period, reduced data entry costs, flexibility in interviewer assignments, elimination of printed questionnaires and postage needed to mail them, and improved data quality are benefits other organizations implementing CAPI have experienced. NASS is using Apple iPads to collect the data and wireless hotspots to transmit the data immediately. The cost of this hardware is offset by the savings from reduced costs for postage, printing and key entry operators. As of January 2011, we have implemented CAPI in three NASS field offices; over the next several years, we will continue to implement it in other offices.

Initiative IV — Centralize Key Operations

NASS is establishing a National Operations Center in St. Louis, Missouri, to provide a centralized environment to increase telephone data collection capacity, maintain sampling frames, process forms, develop data collection instruments, and deliver standardized training for telephone and field interviewers. The center will plan, design, develop and implement procedures for census and survey data collection; process and scan completed survey instruments; and process objective-yield, crop-cutting samples. It will handle all data NASS collects by mail, telephone, electronically, or through face-to-face enumeration.

Centralizing these functions improves our efficiency, reduces costs and the need for duplicate staff, standardizes procedures, and thus improves quality. It also increases career opportunities for both professional and support staff doing list frame work, training, and data collection. Finally, it enables us to conduct surveys for USDA that were not cost effective in a decentralized structure without sufficient critical mass in any one location. We chose the center's St. Louis location based on several factors, including quality of life, cost of living, transportation efficiencies, availability of highly qualified staff, and telecommunications capabilities. Location in the central time zone enables the center to provide service across the country during normal business.

Initiative V — Implement Video Conferencing throughout the Agency

NASS is installing video conferencing technology (VCT) in Headquarters, field offices, and the National Operations Center. VCT will give us the ability to conduct some meetings and training via video conference, which will improve communications among NASS locations, reduce travel costs, and provide standardized training to all locations. We expect the technology to improve data quality as well as communication within the organization. Over time, the initial investment in hardware, software, staff time, bandwidth fees, and contracting will be offset by a reduction in staff time and travel costs.

Initiative VI — Expand Investment in Research and Development

NASS is strengthening its statistical foundation by investing in research directed at critical agency problems. In addition to hiring additional Ph.D. statisticians and survey methodologists and undertaking a variety of measures to increase data quality and efficiencies, we are working with

the National Institute of Statistical Science (NISS) in a model program that brings together academics, doctoral students, postdoctoral candidates, and NASS staff to create teams conducting research in three important areas. The teams began in June 2009 and will continue through May 2011.

ARMS Imputation: The ARMS imputation research team looks at how to improve the current method of imputing data when response levels are inadequate in NASS's largest survey, the Agricultural Resource Management Survey. (Because the Economic Research Service is a partner with us in the ARMS effort, the team includes an ERS staff member.) The objective is to develop a comprehensive, multivariate scheme that produces accurate semi-continuous data. The team examined the impact of the current imputation process on the distribution of a subset of related items (farm program payment items) and showed that adding variables to the process is beneficial. The team is also investigating the use of alternative imputation methods and implementing methodology whose results are better than the current imputation process.

Number of Farms Estimation: NASS uses its area frame both as a stand-alone frame to estimate number of farms and a wide variety of commodities and as a measure of incompleteness for its list surveys and the census of agriculture. However, the area frame estimates of the number of farms for 2007 were quite a bit lower than estimates from the 2007 Census of Agriculture. This difference raises two primary concerns—how many farms were not represented by the area frame and did the adjustments in the agriculture census overestimate the number of farms. This research is investigating the reasons for the difference and designing a better estimate of the number of farms.

Crop Production Modeling: NASS produces multiple forecasts of area planted, area harvested, and yield per harvested area throughout the growing season and then estimates these components at end-of-season or after harvest. Historically, the information for the production components has been synthesized by a panel of experts in NASS's Agricultural Statistics Board using multiple sources, with publication of the resulting official forecasts/estimates. This research team examines how to improve the ASB process by utilizing model-based estimation techniques to combine information from the multiple sources. This research will provide forecasts/estimates that allow for transparency, repeatability, and an estimable error.

In addition to these NISS research projects, we pursue research that will increase efficiencies and data quality in our survey and census estimating programs.

Significance Editing: We are investigating significance editing (defined as statistical data editing, selective editing, and outlier detection) to streamline our labor-intensive, survey data editing processes. Selective editing and automated outlier detection would distinguish problematic survey reports likely to have a large impact on survey results (these would continue to be handled through the current manual review and correction process) from those that could appropriately be automatically corrected (as needed) through sophisticated statistical editing algorithms. Banff software from Statistics Canada, which is the most internationally recognized survey data editing package available that fully implements all widely accepted statistical data editing principles, shows great potential for implementing automated statistical/selective editing and outlier detection in NASS's sample survey program.

County Estimates Modeling: The county estimates program provides county-level data on crop acreage and yield. To ensure that we continue to produce the best possible county-level estimates, the agency has entered into a cooperative agreement with the American Statistical Association and the University of Maryland to investigate the use of statistically sophisticated small area estimation techniques. NASS's current methodology can result in unreliable estimates where sample sizes are small, especially in the presence of valid outlier data. The methodology being researched produces county-level estimates, with error measures, by supplementing the survey data with auxiliary variable information in addition to information in surrounding counties.

Cash Rents Modeling: The 2008 Farm Bill mandated that NASS identify cash rental rates paid for irrigated and non-irrigated cropland as well as certain pasture land for all counties with 20,000 acres or more of such land. Despite the large survey sample sizes, some counties have a small number of survey responses for the three land categories. Working with a world-renowned small area estimation expert at the University of Florida through a cooperative agreement, we are exploring modeling the county-level cash rent values using an empirical Bayes approach. We expect this research to produce more accurate, consistent, standardized and defensible county-level estimates with error measures.

Livestock Modeling: NASS conducts hog inventory surveys quarterly to estimate inventory of breeding and marketing hogs and the future supply of market hogs. From the survey

data and administrative information on slaughter, imports and exports, the Agricultural Statistics Board establishes official estimates of inventory and future supply. NASS is conducting research to increase the transparency and replicability of our estimation process by producing model-based estimates/projections with estimates of error.

Census Content Testing: NASS is testing the forms and alternative data collection procedures to be used in the 2012 Census of Agriculture. We are reviewing and compiling data from the previous census and results from multiple rounds and methods of testing to make information easier to report and to reduce measurement errors in 2012 Census of Agriculture reports. In addition, we are testing alternative procedures to increase the response from producers both via the Internet and overall. The data collected in testing will also be used to test 2012 census systems and processing.

Improve Quality Management

To enhance program planning and product delivery, we are focusing on improving quality management, including developing a quality management framework and benchmarking against other Federal statistical offices. This includes implementing quality control procedures and reviewing standards and guidelines for NASS processes and programs. NASS is utilizing the USDA-supported Lean Six Sigma continuous process improvement process to streamline three important NASS functions:

- Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing – The CAPI team has developed standardized training materials and training processes that are repeatable in all field offices. As a result, field enumerators in all States are receiving the same training on CAPI implementation and using an Apple iPad to collect survey data.
- Service Desk – A standardized process was developed to ensure the Service Desk has trained representatives who can provide a high level of support to all offices. This includes improving customer satisfaction by decreasing response times and providing more accurate IT guidance to customers.
- Data Collection Cost Tracking – Software is being developed to enable improved estimation, monitoring and control of data collection costs incurred by enumerators. This will help NASS manage resources more effectively and reallocate them proactively to meet project budgets.

Cultural Transformation Initiatives

In 2009, Secretary Vilsack issued a “call to action” to USDA’s senior leadership to culturally transform USDA to create a model organization by implementing strategies to enhance leadership, encourage employee engagement, improve performance, and make diversity and inclusion a priority. NASS incorporates civil rights into all aspects of the agency and treats all employees and customers fairly and with dignity and respect (see Appendix A: Civil Rights Goals and Objectives).

Initiative I – Engage NASS Employees in the Cultural Transformation Process

NASS values its employees and their opinions and will continue to engage employees to provide feedback to management. To transform the agency into a model agency, a comprehensive effort from everyone is required (Civil Rights Goal 5).

NASS will continue to generate opportunities to listen to employees’ concerns and ideas. Information sharing is critical for employees at all levels to excel, be motivated and innovative, and understand how their duties and responsibilities fit into their respective local work units, fulfill the agency’s mission, and address departmental priorities. Employees want to understand how and why decisions are made and the potential impact external factors have on their activities.

NASS will continue to work to improve communications within Headquarters and between Headquarters and its field offices, improve transparency in decision making, and ensure that all employees feel part of the NASS team and are recognized for their contributions. Introducing video teleconferencing capabilities in Headquarters and field offices is an important part of this effort and will both improve internal communications and enhance the quality of our programs. By implementing such modern technological systems, NASS will be more efficient, provide better services and incur significant cost savings.

Extensive use of our intranet keeps staff informed on a wide variety of topics, including fast-moving management efficiency initiatives, as does utilizing SharePoint software to share documents and communicate among team members.

Initiative II – Manage Employee Development Effectively

In managing its human capital, NASS enforces civil rights accountability and ensures fair and equitable treatment of all employees and applicants.

NASS provides training opportunities and technical and managerial career advancement paths so employees are well prepared to contribute to the agency’s mission and can utilize their skills and talents. Through developmental opportunities such as mentoring, supervisory training, continuing education, temporary assignments in other offices, and innovative uses of technology, NASS creates an environment that offers flexibility, efficiency, accountability, and promotion potential to all our employees.

Like many Federal agencies, NASS is challenged with the reality of flat or declining budgets and a rapidly changing workforce even as the demands on the agency to provide statistical products and services increase. To respond to these challenges, NASS works with employees to retrain and help them be as efficient and effective as possible. Toward that end, NASS will:

- Conduct periodic assessments of potential management skills to help employees and their managers focus on career development;
- Provide regular information on potential jobs and promotion opportunities; and
- Create an employee skills database that can give managers insight into employees’ academic and professional accomplishments as well as other interests.

Initiative III – Make Civil Rights Accountability and Commitment Central to the Agency

All NASS employees, not just supervisors and managers, must play an active role and be held accountable for promoting civil rights. All employees must treat others with dignity and respect and perform assignments in a manner that demonstrates fairness and cooperation. Civil rights performance is evaluated as part of the performance appraisal process of all USDA employees. A civil rights performance element is

included in the management performance plans of all NASS managers and supervisors (Civil Rights Goal 1) and they receive ongoing training, technical assistance and guidance to carry out their civil rights responsibilities. All employees receive annual equal opportunity training (Civil Rights Goal 3).

The NASS Administrator each year issues a Civil Rights Policy Statement that reaffirms the agency's commitment to civil rights. In addition, NASS annually reviews and updates specific objectives and goals to achieve a model civil rights program (Civil Rights Goal 2).

NASS works proactively to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity using mediation and alternative dispute resolution (Civil Rights Goal 4). The NASS Administrator holds management and employees accountable for ensuring the agency has zero tolerance for any form of discrimination and/or retaliation within the workplace.

NASS will continue to provide sufficient human, financial and organizational resources to support an effective civil rights program. Employees have opportunity to serve on the agency's Civil Rights Advisory Committee, which advises the Administrator, the Civil Rights Director and top agency management on employee and workplace issues. NASS supports the collateral-duty Special Emphasis Program Managers (SEPMs) for women, minorities, and people with disabilities, along with other diversity groups such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) employees and veterans groups (Civil Rights Goal 6). SEPMs are supported by management and provided the resources necessary to do their work.

Initiative IV – Recruit and Retain an Inclusive, Diverse, High-performing Workforce

NASS works closely with youth to promote interest in the fields of mathematics and statistics. For example, we collaborated with FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) to release an educational tool, based on the census of agriculture, to engage students in statistics. NASS outreach staff and field office directors regularly staff exhibit booths and

speak at recruitment events at minority-serving institutions and diversity organizations nationwide, and NASS exposes students to a variety of careers through the USDA summer employment program.

NASS's longer-term focus is on creating a high-performance workforce that is customer-centered and results-oriented. NASS is organizing its workforce to achieve this, as well as developing its employees to assume higher levels of responsibility. As management efficiency initiatives change the way we do business, NASS will redefine and clearly communicate career paths. We will work to maintain or improve NASS's level of service to our stakeholders and to measure the effects of structural and program changes.

Initiative V — Focus on Customers and Enhance Community Outreach

NASS is striving to become more customer focused and to improve the data collection experience for those who participate in our surveys. Providing data should be a positive experience whether the respondent is filling out a paper questionnaire, speaking with a telephone or field enumerator, or responding online. To become more customer-centric, we are focusing on customer engagement, product enhancement, and evaluation of customer satisfaction.

To successfully engage our customers, we are committed to ongoing efforts to identify and understand our various audiences and their specific needs and capabilities. This includes seeking out non-traditional customers or those involved in emerging issues and demonstrating the linkages between data collection and data products. At the same time, we are looking to enhance our data products and deliver them in ways that meet the needs of diverse audiences. Finally, we are establishing agency-wide procedures to measure customer satisfaction. In addition to customer surveys, this will include client interviews, focus groups, and other research to determine whether NASS data products are perceived as useful, accurate, timely and reliable.

Appendix A:

Civil Rights Goals and Objectives

USDA Civil Rights Goal: Commitment of Agency Leadership/Strategic Plan Integration	NASS Civil Rights Goal 1: Incorporate USDA’s Civil Rights policies and regulations throughout the agency’s operations to ensure that customers and employees are treated in accordance with anti-discrimination laws and regulations
	Obj. 1.1. Provide all employees a copy of Departmental Regulation 4300-010, Civil Rights Accountability Policy and Procedures, dated January 18, 2006
	Obj. 1.2. Put a civil rights, equal employment opportunity, and diversity and inclusion element in the performance plans of all managers and supervisors
USDA Civil Rights Goal: Proactive Management and Legal Compliance	NASS Civil Rights Goal 2: Create a model Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Program as outlined in Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Management Directive 715
	Obj. 2.1. Issue an annual agency Civil Rights and Anti-Harassment Policy Statement
	Obj. 2.2 Devise strategies to remove barriers and increase opportunities for the hiring, advancement and retention of groups underrepresented in the NASS workforce
	Obj. 2.3 Conduct regular civil rights compliance reviews such as Human Resource Management Evaluations (HRMEs)
	Obj. 2.4 Increase outreach efforts to increase procurement from small, minority and disadvantaged businesses, including businesses owned by women, service-disabled veterans, and persons with disabilities and those with HUBZone (Historically Underutilized Business Zone) certification
	NASS Civil Rights Goal 3: Train managers, supervisors and employees in their civil rights responsibilities
	Obj. 3.1. Provide ongoing EEO training, technical assistance and guidance to managers and supervisors
	Obj. 3.2. Ensure all employees receive USDA- and EEOC-required annual EEO training
USDA Civil Rights Goal: Secretary’s Cultural Transformation Initiative and Commitment to Diversity	NASS Civil Rights Goal 4: Manage an effective EEO complaints process
	Obj. 4.1. Process EEO complaints within prescribed timeframes and resolve complaints at the earliest stage using methods such as mediation, conciliation, coaching and facilitation
USDA Civil Rights Goal: Establish and Implement a Special Emphasis Program to Expand Diversity	NASS Civil Rights Goal 5: Develop an effective work plan to meet USDA initiatives around cultural transformation and diversity
	Obj. 5.1. Establish an agency committee of managers and employees to develop a plan to address cultural transformation and diversity issues: leadership accountability and commitment, outreach and partnership, recruitment and hiring, retention and promotion, diversity training and awareness, and employee development and recognition
USDA Civil Rights Goal: Establish and Implement a Special Emphasis Program to Expand Diversity	NASS Civil Rights Goal 6: Develop an effective Special Emphasis Program
	Obj. 6.1. Appoint collateral-duty Special Emphasis Program Managers for the following groups: African Americans; American Indian/Alaska Native; Asian American/Pacific Islander; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT); Persons with Disabilities; Veterans; and Women
	Obj. 6.2. Develop a Special Emphasis Program Assessment Plan/Strategy to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of the agency’s efforts to expand and achieve diversity in the workforce

Appendix B:

External Program Evaluations

NASS has sanctioned and supported three external program reviews during the past several years. A recurring recommendation from these reviews has been for NASS to enhance its research program. In response, NASS's Research and Development Division has begun collaborative efforts with the National Institute of Statistical Science and academia, extensive outreach and testing for the 2012 Census of Agriculture, and research into the use of handheld devices to collect data. NASS is prioritizing and implementing the specific recommendations from the three reviews.

Agricultural Resource Management Survey

The Agricultural Resource Management Survey is a complex undertaking. From its start as a melding of data collected from the field, the farm, and the household in a multiphase, multi-frame, and multiple mode survey design, ARMS has increased in complexity over the decade of its existence as more sophisticated demands for its outputs have been made. Today, the survey faces difficult choices and challenges, including a need for a thorough review of its methods, practices, and procedures. In 2006, NASS and the USDA Economic Research Service jointly contracted the National Academies to conduct such a review.

The panel concluded that ARMS has been carried out with admirable attention to achieving high standards on most elements. Nonetheless, there is room for improvement in all of them. In addition to identifying areas of needed improvement in current methods and practices, the review identified several emerging challenges. These challenges are associated with the changing structure of farming, overall trends in Federal surveys—such as the growing difficulty of obtaining satisfactory survey response—and the growing sophistication of survey data users, both inside and outside the Federal Government. NASS and ERS have attempted to respond to these challenges with some foresight—adding new questions, testing such initiatives as incentives for increasing reporting, developing proposals to collect longitudinal data, and enhancing the provision of microdata files in a protected environment. Current research on multivariate imputation techniques for use in ARMS is a follow on to this study. NASS will continue to research a number of areas that still need further attention.

Census of Agriculture

In May 2006, NASS asked the Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics to assemble a panel of experts to conduct an “independent, comprehensive and objective review of the census of agriculture.” NASS asked the panel to focus on two questions regarding the census: *Is NASS doing things right?* and *Is NASS doing the right things?* The first question relates to technical issues involved in the collection, processing and dissemination of census data. The second is much broader and relates to the rationale and aim of the census. To answer these questions, the review looked at the full range of census activities—from planning and implementation to analysis and publication of results.

As context for the review, the panel examined a number of major questions and mega-trends pertinent to the census of agriculture. A rapidly changing agricultural sector raises questions about the target population for the census and what data can and should be collected. Dramatic changes in information technology continue to pose both opportunities and challenges to reaching respondents, processing data, and designing output products. Users and potential users are demanding more and better data and more flexibility in how the data can be organized. This emphasizes the need for more transparency regarding data characteristics and processing methods, as well as clear and documented criteria for prioritizing the content of the census questionnaires. Likewise, criteria are

needed for determining whether specific data items should be collected via the census or via census follow-on sample surveys, ARMS or other sample surveys. NASS should view and manage all these surveys as optional data collection vehicles.

Prices Program

In April 2008, NASS asked the Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics to assemble a panel of expert social scientists from academia, government and the private sector to conduct an “independent, comprehensive and objective review” of the NASS Agricultural Prices Program. The purpose of the review was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program and to recommend changes. Key findings from the review:

- NASS needs a fresh vision for the prices program.
- Fundamental improvements are needed in the conceptual basis for prices and price indexes.
- NASS must address the responsibility that goes with heavy dependence on data and indexes from other agencies.
- NASS must commit to a stronger program of future-oriented research to support the operations program.
- Increased transparency is essential to all aspects of the Agricultural Prices Program.

In response to this review, NASS is conducting an internal review of its Agricultural Prices Paid and Prices Received Estimation Program. An important part of this review is properly documenting the programs to improve transparency and service to the user community. NASS is in the process of formally documenting all aspects of the program.

For more information about NASS visit our
Web site: www.nass.usda.gov

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National Agricultural Statistics Service

