

The History of Agricultural Statistics in the U.S.

The history of collecting data on U.S. agriculture dates back at least as far as President George Washington, who kept meticulous statistical records describing his own and other farms. The 1790 census counted some 4 million Americans, 9 out of 10 of whom lived on farms: the modern distinction between producers and consumers did not then exist. At this time, concerns about what crops to plant and how to ensure a bountiful harvest dominated the agricultural scene.

In 1791 President Washington, spurred by an inquiry from an Englishman named Arthur Young, wrote to several farmers requesting information on land values, crops, yields, livestock prices, and taxes. It was, in effect, the Nation's first agricultural survey. Washington himself prepared the survey and compiled the results. Between September 24 and November 18, 1791, he sent Young three letters -- in a sense, the Nation's first crop report -- that provided agricultural statistics on an area extending roughly 250 miles from north to south and 100 miles from east to west. The strip ran through an area, which is today Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, where most of the young country's population lived. But the first President met with defeat when in 1796 he proposed the establishment of a National board of Agriculture: Congress rejected the idea.

The next major step forward in agricultural data collection came in 1839, when Commissioner of Patents Henry Ellsworth made his mark on agriculture. He prevailed upon Congress to designate \$1,000 from the Patent Office Fund for "collecting and distributing seeds, carrying out agricultural investigations, and procuring agricultural statistics."

Then, in 1840, detailed agricultural information was collected through the first Census of Agriculture, which

provided a nationwide inventory of production. When the 1840 census information arrived, Ellsworth was able to combine it with other information to estimate production by States and territories. His estimates, made yearly through 1844, established the general pattern of annual agricultural reports that continues to this day.

USDA itself was established by Abraham Lincoln in 1862. He called it "the people's department," and its first crop report appeared in July 1863. NASS traces its roots all the way back to 1863, when USDA established a Division of Statistics.

During the Civil War, USDA collected and distributed crop and livestock statistics to help farmers assess the value of the goods they produced. At that time, commodity buyers usually had more current and detailed market information than did farmers, a circumstance that often prevented farmers from getting a fair price for their goods. Producers in today's marketplace would be similarly handicapped were it not for the information provided by NASS.

The creation of USDA's Crop Reporting Board in 1905 (now called the Agricultural Statistics Board) was another landmark in the development of a nationwide statistical service for agriculture. A USDA reorganization in 1961 led to the creation of the Statistical Reporting Service, known today as National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) of which the Agricultural Statistics Board is a part.

The Board prepares and releases the NASS reports. It consists of a permanent chairperson and secretary, and other NASS staff members chosen to participate in the preparation of a specific report based on their detailed knowledge of a particular topic.

USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service Mission Statement

The NASS mission is to provide timely, accurate, and useful statistics in service to U. S. agriculture.