

# Advisory Committee On Agriculture Statistics

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Annual Meeting, December 2-3, 2014**



**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
National Agricultural Statistics Service

# Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics (ACAS)

December 2-3, 2014

## NASS National Operations Center

9700 Page Avenue, Suite 400

St. Louis, Missouri

Drury Inn & Suites – Brentwood

8700 Eager Road

Brentwood, Missouri

## Members Present

J. Michael Baise

Beth Carroll, Ph.D.

Jennifer Dennis, Ph.D.

Zachary Ducheneaux

Carole Engle, Ph. D.

Carl R. Matson

Douglas A. Huebsch, Committee Chair

Larry L. Janssen, Ph.D.

Roger S. Mix

Lawrence E. Sanchez, Ph.D.

Louise Waterman

Shirin Ahmed (Census Bureau *ex-officio*)

Gregory Pompeli, Ph.D. (Economic Research Service *ex-officio*)

## Members Absent

Jose Candelaria

John C. Foltz, Ph.D.

John D. Lawrence, Ph.D.

Ariane E. Lotti

Doug Charles Goehring

Emmett Redd, Ph.D.

Robert Yonkers, Ph.D.

Rosalee K. Coleman

Jean Opsomer, Ph.D.

## Advisory Committee Officers

Hubert Hamer, Executive Director

Bryan Combs, Designated Federal Officer

## **United States Department of Agriculture**

Catherine Woteki, Ph.D., Under Secretary of Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area

### **National Agricultural Statistics Service**

#### **Senior Executive Service Attendees:**

Joe Reilly, NASS Administrator  
Renee Picanso, NASS Associate Administrator  
Kevin Barnes, Director, Western Field Offices  
Jody McDaniel, Acting Director, Eastern Field Offices  
Linda Young, Ph.D., Director, Research and Development Division  
Hubert Hamer, Director, Statistics Division  
Joseph Prusacki, Director, National Operations Division

#### **Speakers:**

Chris Messer, Chief, Census Planning Branch  
Troy Joshua, Chief, Environmental, Economics, and Demographics Branch  
Barbara Rater, Chief, Survey Administration Branch  
Christy Meyer, Head, Census Data Section  
Sue King, Staff Director, Public Affairs Office

#### **Attendees:**

Chris Gottschall

#### **Scribes:**

Kimberly Goeke  
Julie Newport

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## MEETING SUMMARY

### 1. Introduction

The Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics (ACAS) annual meeting was called to order by Committee Chair Douglas Huebsch on Tuesday, December 2, 2014, at 8:03 a.m. Present were 11 of the 20 ACAS members, two Committee ex-officio representatives, and seven Senior Executive Service staff members from the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). Committee members, NASS staff, and meeting guests were asked to introduce themselves, after which Doug Huebsch welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Hubert Hamer, who serves as the Advisory Committee Executive Director, first welcomed the ACAS members to the new NASS National Operations Center in St. Louis, MO. The facility functions as a regional office, a data calling center, and the hub for list maintenance and data collection. Mr. Hamer spoke to the Committee about the purpose and duties of the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics. Mr. Hamer thanked the members who participated in the Advisory Committee meeting on November 13-14, 2013.

Bryan Combs, Designated Federal Officer, reviewed the contents of attendees' packets, which included a copy of the 2013 Summary and Recommendations, Confidentiality Certification form (ADM-004), a current list of ACAS members, and presentation materials for the meeting.

Mr. Hamer asked Committee members to sign the NASS form ADM-004 since sensitive information would be discussed during the meeting so members could formulate informed recommendations. Each member was emailed the documents explaining the confidentiality rules and standards members must follow during the meeting. Additional copies of these materials were available for members to review before signing the confidentiality form. All forms were signed and witnessed.

Mr. Hamer next gave a presentation on the Committee's function and responsibilities, reminding members that the duties are solely advisory. The Committee represents the views and needs of both users and suppliers of agriculture statistics; it is charged with advising the Secretary on the conduct of the periodic census and surveys of agriculture, other related surveys, and the types of agricultural information to obtain from survey respondents. In addition, the Committee makes recommendations regarding the content of agricultural reports. Mr. Hamer also discussed the mission of NASS, which is to provide timely, accurate, and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture.

NASS is responsible for administering the USDA's statistical estimating program and the every five-year Census of Agriculture; coordinating federal and state agricultural statistics needs; and conducting statistical research, including research for other federal agencies, state agencies, private organizations, and other countries. NASS does not:

- Set policy
- Regulate activities
- Permit influence
- Disclose individual records or
- Favor any group above others.

## **2. 2013 Recommendations: Review and Update**

Using a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Hamer reviewed the Advisory Committee's recommendations from the November 2013 meeting and provided NASS's response to each.

### **2013 Recommendations and Responses:**

**Recommendation No. 1.** The Advisory Committee commends USDA for accepting or acting on the 2012 recommendations, and also commends NASS on its significant improvements through the recent restructure and reorganization. We recognize that recent budgetary considerations have posed significant challenges, but we commend the agency for continuing to focus on productive change for both programs and personnel.

**Background:** At the 2012 meeting, the Advisory Committee made eleven recommendations to NASS. Each recommendation was reviewed and a response was submitted to Committee members.

**NASS Response:** The agency considered each recommendation carefully, acted upon it as it deemed appropriate, and provided a careful accounting of follow-up.

**Recommendation No. 2.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS follows the 5-Year Operational Plan, which allows the Agency the opportunity to focus its efforts, above maintaining the current operational programs, towards the attainment of successfully completing identified and agreed upon incremental changes to better align the current business model, systems, and processes to the long-term goals. This plan should be reviewed annually, successes documented, and revisions made that reflect necessary changes in order to provide a clear vision to NASS staff as they navigate forward.

**Background:** In 2009, NASS was structured with 46 Field Offices that were staff with more than 600 employees, and 5 Headquarters units that facilitated the development and oversight of NASS programs. Over the past five years, NASS has undergone a significant period of transition that has incorporated the benefits of numerous efficiency initiatives, two reorganizations, and increased investments in statistical research. In October 2013, the culmination of these efforts resulted in the new organization that will benefit from centralized processing at the National Operations Division, enhanced integration of

research into the business process through the newly developed Methodology Division, and a new field structure that enhances career opportunities for staff while increasing data quality at a reduced cost. With the installation of high quality video teleconferencing equipment, a centralized network utilizing thin client machines, a centralized processing center, enhanced remote data collection, and a substantial progress in re-engineering more than 30 applications for survey data collection and processing, NASS was positioned to become a more nimble organization that could complete survey processes that will produce better data quality at a lower cost.

**NASS Response:** Following the acceptance of the recommendations from the Secretary of Agriculture, the Strategic Planning Office will finalize the Agency's 5-year Operational Plan, and establish the annual reporting and revision cycle to ensure incremental change is accomplished to accommodate the identified long term goals of the organization.

**Recommendation No. 3.** The Advisory Committee recommends that the NASS receive "base funding" which would include a flat line budget appropriation, covering the cost of doing the quinquennial (five-year) Census of Agriculture plus additional incremental funding that would be used to conduct census follow-on surveys.

**Background:** Historically, the Census of Agriculture has needed two consecutive and cumulative funding increases leading up to the largest increase for the production year.

**NASS Response:** In an effort to more easily plan Census of Agriculture activities, particularly follow-on Special Studies, NASS presented a flat-line approach in its appropriations budget request for the Census of Agriculture program in 2013 as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics. This flat-line method would eliminate the need to carry over money between fiscal years except for those years prior to the census reference year. Because the print contract money needs to be obligated immediately at the beginning of fiscal years ending in "2" and "7" it would be prudent for NASS to place a large portion of the money required (approximately \$2 million) to carryover from the years ending in "1" and "6" into the years ending in "2 and "7". These funds could be used immediately in conjunction with the bidding period for the print contract. It is important to note that a flat-line budget makes it difficult to allow for increases in variable costs such as postage, materials, and cost of living adjustments to salaries.

The 2014 enacted budget will permit NASS to be conduct four out of six follow-on surveys scheduled in the original plan of the four year flat-line census of agriculture. The Energy: Biomass survey was eliminated and the Land Tenure survey-Phase I will be conducted through a reimbursable agreement with Economic Research Service.

The 2015 President's Budget includes \$3.037 million for decentralized rent and security payments and NASS will conduct two of the three follow-on surveys scheduled in the original plan of the four year flat-line census of agriculture. Again the Energy: Co-Products survey was eliminated.

**Recommendation No. 4.** The Advisory Committee recommends that the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey and the Census of Aquaculture Survey be included in the base funding for Fiscal Year 2014.

**Background:** Responses to the census of agriculture provide NASS an opportunity to identify sub populations for follow-up surveys which collect more detailed data about a particular commodity or production practice. NASS conducts these surveys between census production years. These surveys are subject to funding levels.

**NASS Response:** NASS received the necessary fiscal year 2014 funding to conduct both Census Special Studies, also referred to as Census follow-on programs. Data collection for the 2013 Census of Aquaculture began in December 2013. Data collection for the 2013 Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey began in January 2014. Results from both of these surveys are scheduled to be available before the end of the calendar year.

**Recommendation No. 5.** The Advisory Committee recommends that once the Census of Agriculture is funded through the aforementioned steady base funding level scenario, Census follow-on programs should be conducted in the following order for Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016

Land Tenure/Ownership Survey

Horticulture

Local Foods

Energy Co-Products

Biomass

Organic Products

Current Ag Industry Reports

**Background:** In an effort to make planning easier and associating programs with a specific cost, NASS has proposed moving to a flat-line budget between census production years.

**NASS Response:** Land Tenure/Ownership Survey - NASS has received FY 2015 funding to conduct a Land Tenure survey. The USDA - Economic Research Service (a principal stakeholder) has agreed to fund presurvey work to be conducted in FY 2014. NASS will fund the FY 2015 activities which include: data collection, edit, analysis and publication of the data.

Horticulture – NASS has begun initial preparations for conducting the 2014 Census of Horticultural Specialties. Initial budget indications show the funding will be available in FY 2015 to conduct it.

Current Ag Industry Reports – NASS received FY 2014 funding to conduct these surveys. Planning is currently underway with data collection tentatively scheduled to begin in September 2014.

Organic Products – NASS has received FY 2014 funds to provide data on organic production. NASS plans to use a portion of the funding to provide a special tabulation of organic data reported on the 2012 Census of Agriculture. With the remaining funds, NASS is investigating the feasibility of assimilating organic crop production and livestock inventories through a survey with certifying agencies in FY 2015. NASS also plans to conduct an organic survey for the Risk Management Agency in 2015 for the 2014 crop year. Survey results will be available in August, 2015.

Local Foods, Energy Co-Products, and Biomass - Initial budget indications do not include any of these surveys for FY 2015.

**Recommendation No. 6.** The Advisory Committee recommends NASS provide USDA departmental officials with embargoed Census data up to 3 business days in advance of data release. The Secretary and other USDA leaders will be more thoroughly briefed and can prepare materials that will resonate with stakeholders and that can be used by NASS regional and state offices. The Committee also recommends that NASS provide National Association of State Departments of Agriculture members with embargoed state-level briefing and data up to 24 hours prior to release with strict confidentiality requirements in place. This will help maximize local level exposure of the data with informed state officials.

**Background:** Traditionally, NASS has released Census of Agriculture data at a specified time and date with only limited external pre-release access. In 2007, NASS permitted a briefing for the Secretary of Agriculture three hours in advance of the initial data release. In addition, NASS leadership allowed field office state directors to brief NASDA members shortly before release. All embargoed pre-release briefings required signed confidentiality forms.

A limited pre-release embargo policy is in accordance with Federal Statistical Directive #4, which guides statistical agencies on the release and dissemination of statistical products. The directive allows for pre-release access to foster improved public understanding of and access to the data and accuracy of any initial commentary about the information.

The 2007 Census data were released in February 2009 via a press conference held by the Secretary of Agriculture. At the same time, USDA issued traditional news releases and documents that further described the data. NASS sent its first tweet via Twitter as part of the 2007 Census data release. News media stories followed immediately but NASS and departmental comment and information followed more slowly. The delay in USDA comments was a result of the limited time available to process the information and further describe and convey the data in accurate, timely and useful ways.

**NASS Response:** With longer lead time, NASS can leverage USDA resources and today's technologies to better publicize the data and the stories of changes and trends in U.S. agriculture the Census tells. NASS and the department can prepare a full suite of products for press, employees, stakeholders and the public upon release. These can include secretarial/departmental pre-recorded video and radio pieces, Internet content, commodity- and geographic-specific statements and information pieces. Social media distributes these materials more creatively and quickly than before.

With an hours-long embargo period, NASS misses an opportunity to control and coordinate stronger, more intelligent announcements that provide better public understanding and access to Census data. This embargo policy also limits the ability of regional and local USDA officials (including NASS) to coordinate and participate in localized announcements.

**Recommendation No. 7.** The Advisory Committee encourages NASS to find opportunities to get information out in a very public manner with the goal of increasing response rates and tracking emerging trends. We also recommend that the USDA provide directives to all agencies to demonstrate the use of NASS data in their programs at the local level.

**Background:** In the past, NASS has taken a “one size fits all” approach to its customers and the information products and services it delivers to them. As the agency’s customer base expands and diversifies, as these customers become more sophisticated in terms of how they acquire and use statistical data, and as information delivery methods evolve, this approach is no longer the most strategic and effective way to operate. Looking at best practices employed by other statistical agencies around the world, NASS recognizes the need to segment its customers and provide programs, products and services tailored to their specific needs.

**NASS Response:** We have developed and are implementing a strategic communications plan guides how we communicate and reach out to data users and providers both internally and externally. The ultimate goal of all communications strategies and tactics is to increase survey response rates. Through our USDA agency communications network, we are working to find ways to demonstrate the use of NASS data in agency programs to help respondents connect the survey to the benefit of responding.

**Recommendation No. 8.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS form a task force to develop criteria and parameters for ranking both the order of surveys and the data items that should be collected. This task force should include both NASS staff and several members of the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics.

**Background:** The ACAS members recommended the formation of a task force to work with the representatives from NASS divisions and administration and determine criteria for ranking survey periodicity, importance considering data usability and continuity factors, and data user need for the information when budget or other external factors cause deviation from the established survey calendar.

**NASS Response:** Once the Secretary of Agriculture has accepted these recommendations, the ACAS Chairperson and the NASS Executive Director will meet and draft the subcommittee particulars such as number of members and outline the focus and pen directives that will eventually become the subcommittee charter. Next, the chairperson will ask for members to nominate themselves to serve on this subcommittee. Membership will be decided by both the ACAS Chairperson and the NASS Executive Director.

**Recommendation No. 9.** The Advisory Committee recommends that before a separate Land Tenure and Ownership Survey is dispatched, previously collected data for NASS agricultural surveys, program administrative data from FSA and NRCS Service Centers be canvassed to determine if producers have already answered some of the questions so as not to burden the respondents with attaining the same information.

**Background:** The last special study done of this kind was the 1999 Agricultural Economics Land Operating Survey (AELOS). NASS had planned to conduct a similar survey in FY 2011 but due to budget cuts, suspended activities.

**NASS Response:** NASS has received funds for a land tenure survey in FY 2015. NASS has begun internal discussions on methodology and the availability of administrative and previously reported data. Some of the data collection will be in combination with the

Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS), which will have a significant reduction on respondent burden.

**NASS General Response to Census Recommendations:** As NASS goes forward with its FY 2014 agency request, we will propose a change from cyclical funding to flat-line budget appropriations between production years of the Census of Agriculture. If approved, out-year planning will be determined by the level of flat appropriations. Major census-related activities have been identified for fiscal years 2014 through 2017. These activities include follow-ons but give priority to the necessary tasks associated with building toward a successful 2017 Census of Agriculture. An estimated cost for each follow-on survey and the availability of other resources will guide NASS in determining the timing of a particular special study. The Advisory Committee's recommendations reference four specific census follow-ons. Each of these has been identified by NASS as projects to be conducted if sufficient budget funding is secured.

Chairman Huebsch solicited comments from Committee members at this stage of the meeting. He reminded members that all should be listening and formulating advisory recommendations for the areas where NASS is asking for the Committee's input and feedback.

### **3. State of NASS**

Joe Reilly, NASS Administrator, welcomed and thanked everyone for taking time out of their busy schedules to help NASS chart its future. He stressed the importance of the Advisory Committee in this endeavor.

Mr. Reilly provided an update on the agency's budget and the outlook for future budget planning. In fiscal years 2011 and 2014, NASS has shown a decline in funding for Agricultural Estimates. Mr. Reilly noted that the advisory committee members can help NASS define what base programs should be which would provide NASS guidance for program suspensions based on changes in funding for the Agricultural Estimates programs. NASS's reimbursable survey projects and international work were also discussed.

Mr. Reilly discussed the NASS estimates program and how the input from the committee helps NASS define what the base programs should be. Upcoming projects were discussed which included Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL), the Organics survey, Census of Horticulture Specialties, Current Agricultural Industrial Reports (CAIR), Pollinator Surveys, Antimicrobial Resistance, and Urban Agriculture.

**Discussion:** Mr. Reilly fielded several questions and comments regarding how NASS would be indentifying non-operator landlords. Mr. Reilly explained that we were using the June Area survey to identify rented land then using tax records, FSA data and other sources to identify the land owner. Additional questions on comments related to urban agriculture were discussed by the group including if NASS was cross referencing with schools, food and nutrition service,

etc. to find urban farms. NASS is working with these groups but the information that is available is not entirely correct to meet the data collection needs. NASS is also working with MACE on one test case of utilizing high resolution satellite images and will know more on the feasibility of using this method once the results of the test case are available.

#### **4. Welcome from the USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area**

Dr. Catherine Woteki, Chief Scientist and Under Secretary for REE, was introduced by NASS's Administrator, Joe Reilly. Dr. Woteki welcomed Committee members via video teleconference. Presenting from Washington, D.C., Dr. Woteki remarked how much she and the Department appreciate the Committee's input to guiding the statistical program and priorities for NASS, which both directly and indirectly affect all of USDA.

Dr. Woteki provided some information on the REE and USDA organizational structure and then talked briefly about REE initiatives. She explained that as Under Secretary and Chief Scientist, she has oversight of the four agencies in the mission area (concerned with intramural and extramural research, education, extension, and statistics). In addition to NASS, these are the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Economic Research Service (ERS), and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA). In her role, Dr. Woteki sets the direction for research in the areas of biological and physical sciences, plant and animal breeding, animal health, climate and sustainability, bio-energy, human nutrition, and food safety.

Dr. Woteki noted she also chairs the USDA Science Council, which facilitates cross-Department coordination and collaboration among all USDA agencies to ensure that science informs policy and program decisions as well as advances the scientific discovery, technological breakthroughs, and innovation required to achieve the Secretary's science and technology priorities. Ultimately, the Council speeds up the technology transfer from the public to private sector and speeds the laboratory to market development and innovation through improved communication. She also works closely with Chief Scientists from other agencies and departments throughout the government.

She cited the following recent research activities:

- Open data initiative
- Implementation of the Common Rule
- The newly formed Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research
- Emphasis on new/underprivileged farms

Dr. Woteki recognized that NASS data is essential to help know how well USDA is meeting the needs of farmers and ranchers, helping international efforts, and plays a huge role in advancing new technology.

**Discussion:** Dr. Woteki fielded questions and comments regarding the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research. Members of the committee were interested in the funding for the foundation and the committee make up. Dr. Woteki explained that the foundation was setup with \$200 million in federal funding, from CCC funds, with the intent to grow with private funding. She outlined the initial organization of the foundation and noted that once the foundation is organized the bylaws allow for members to be added or removed.

## 5. Census Programs

Chris Messer, Chief of Census Planning Branch, provided an overview of the Census programs and products. Mrs. Messer detailed the recent releases of the Agriculture Census Web Maps, Organics tabulation, and Watershed tabulation and noted the upcoming releases of Typology and Specialty Crops. Additional Census Program release date and timing were discussed for Census of Aquaculture, Farm and Ranch Irrigation, Census of Horticultural Specialties, Organic survey, TOTAL, National Agricultural Classification Survey (NACS), Current Agricultural Industrial Reports (CAIR), and Local Foods.

**Discussion:** Members inquired as to whether the international certifiers would be included in the Census of Organic Certifiers and what type of questions NASS would be asking the certifiers. Mrs. Messer explained that we were not including international certifiers and that NASS would be asking the certifiers data that is from the plans they certify to provide baseline annual data. Additional discussion on the data products that would be available from the CAIR project was also discussed. It was noted that maps of production vs. processing would not be made available due to confidentiality.

## 6. 2017 Census of Agriculture

Chris Messer, Chief of Census Planning Branch, provided an overview of the focus and schedule for the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Mrs. Messer detailed the Census Content teams core activities of reviewing the 2012 Census data and providing recommendations of problematic data series, items that could be removed, items to be added, and prioritizing the deletions and additions. She also detailed the Data Collection Testing team's activities of evaluating feedback and testing changes to new and/or modified content.

**Discussion:** The Committee was interested in use of a short or compressed form for the 2017 Census of Agriculture and using email to reach producers for completing surveys

electronically. Additional discussion focused on the collection of demographics data on the Census of Agriculture. Many members made note of the term operator possibly not being the best term to use and that with the increasing complexity of farming operations it can be difficult for respondents to understand how to correctly fill out the Census demographic information for their particular structure.

## **7. Response Rates and Respondent Relations**

Barbara Rater, Chief of Survey Administration Branch presented the committee with an overview of response rates trends over the last several years to a few key NASS crop and livestock surveys. Mr. Rater also detailed the challenges NASS faces with smaller survey universes, increasing demands for statistics and a more diverse survey population. Measures currently being taken to address the challenges were also presented to the group along with the white paper below which was provided to members prior to the meeting.

### **Response Rates and Respondent Relations**

#### **Background**

Over the last 15 years, response rates on NASS surveys have declined while the demand for timelier, higher quality statistics and services has increased, adding respondent burden and straining respondent relations. Demands for producers' time is on the rise and overall anti-government sentiment is becoming more prevalent. Some producers are less willing to spend time providing precise data, especially if asked survey questions they have recently answered. Many factors impact a survey respondent's willingness to cooperate on surveys. Interview length, survey complexity, frequency of being interviewed or a general lack of understanding of how NASS reports and services benefit them all impact whether or not an individual chooses to provide data.

#### **Issue**

Response rates, also known as completion rates, refer to the proportion of people in the sample who answered the survey. Survey response rates are viewed as an important indicator of survey quality. Higher response rates usually mean more accurate survey results; however measuring the relationship between survey non-response and the accuracy of a survey statistic is complex and expensive.

Producers are increasingly reluctant to respond to surveys. This trend is troubling since surveys are the foundation of NASS data collection activities. For example, response rates for the June Crops Agricultural Production Survey have dropped 21 percent from 83 percent in 1992 to 62 percent in 2014. In 1998, the survey response rate for the U.S. January Cattle Survey was 86 percent. In 2008, response rates were 81 percent. By 2014, January Cattle Survey response rates had fallen 12 percent to 74 percent. The goal for this paper is to engage the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics to help NASS determine methods and

strategies to improve respondent relations and reverse the trend of deteriorating response rates.

### **How can NASS improve survey response rates while minimizing the burden/fatigue on producers?**

#### **Initial Efforts**

- Strengthen relationships with large and impact operations. NASS is evaluating ways to systematically identify large and impact farms by state and commodity. Customizing data collection forms is being evaluated as a possible solution to improving respondent relations and increasing response rates.
- Improve web-based data collection. Efforts are underway to modernize electronic data collection. NASS is working to improve self-responding by operators via the Web. This effort will improve the user and web interfaces of electronic data reporting and format questionnaires to fit mobile devices.

#### **Potential Activities**

- Balancing the need for statistics and the burden on respondents is a challenge. Evaluate survey sampling procedures in an effort to reduce the frequency of survey contacts. Changes in sampling procedures would need to be monitored since they could impact estimates.
- Evaluate expanding the use of previously reported data (PRD) to reduce response burden on producers.

Comments are welcome and can be sent to Barbara Rater at ([barbara\\_rater@nass.usda.gov](mailto:barbara_rater@nass.usda.gov)).

**Discussion:** The Committee discussed and provided several thoughts on ways NASS could attempt to address declining response rates. The use of social media was discussed to get the message out about NASS surveys and also to provide “fun facts” that may engage respondents in participating in surveys. It was also noted that this would most likely reach younger producers but also using something like RFD-TV would more likely reach the older producers. Increasing partnerships with State Departments of Agriculture, Extension Service, commodity groups, and increasing the presence of the NASS State Statisticians were also noted. Another point of discussion was connecting how USDA programs are tied to NASS data such as counties receiving disaster assistance based on statistics produced by NASS.

## **8. Expanding the Data Enclave**

Christy Meyer, Head of Census Data Section discussed special tabulations and request for unpublished data along with the NORC Data Enclave which is co-sponsored by the Economic Research Service (ERS) and NASS. Mrs. Meyer presented the issue that has developed since the NASS reorganization which decreased access to NASS data labs and provided a proposal of expanding the Data Enclave to include additional datasets to the committee. The white

paper below was also provided to the committee prior to the meeting.

## **Expanding the Data Enclave**

November 18, 2014

### **Background**

Each year NASS releases over 500 publications about U.S. agriculture, including crop, livestock, economic, environmental, and demographic data. Every five years NASS conducts the Census of Agriculture and releases a series of publications with census results. Together, the survey and census publications provide comprehensive data on virtually every aspect of agriculture across the United States and outlying areas.

Data users can access copies of the publications on the NASS website ([www.nass.usda.gov](http://www.nass.usda.gov)) and can query NASS' online database Quick Stats (<http://quickstats.nass.usda.gov>) to access data from a variety of surveys as well as the census. They can export Quick Stats data and open it directly in spreadsheet programs such as Microsoft Excel.

The data NASS provides in its publications and through Quick Stats are aggregated data. Before releasing any data, NASS makes sure that the aggregated data do not disclose any individual-level data. It is important to note that by law NASS collects all data under a confidentiality clause (Title 7, U.S. Code; Confidentiality Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2002, Public Law 107-347). This assures respondents that their data will remain confidential and cannot be shared in a manner that would disclose their individual operation. This element is essential to NASS' ability to receive voluntary responses from our survey respondents. Without respondents' support we would not be able to continue to provide high-quality statistics.

A wide variety of data users look for information about different aspects of agriculture. NASS publications meet the vast majority of data users' needs. However, many times data users would like additional information for their area of interest that is not available in published form. To get more return for the tax payer dollars spent on data collection and to reduce respondent burden, NASS provides additional information through three methods: special tabulations, requests to access unpublished data, and memorandums of understanding with project agreements for accessing data from the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS).

*Special Tabulations.* Special tabulations are available to anyone who requests them by email, phone, or a special form available on the NASS website ([http://www.nass.usda.gov/Data\\_and\\_Statistics/Special\\_Tabulations](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Data_and_Statistics/Special_Tabulations)). NASS reviews all requests to ensure they are in the best interest of agriculture. Some requests are straightforward such as requests for data in a different format (e.g., csv file instead of PDF). Most requests are for a summary of data in a different form than was originally released or for a different perspective of the data (e.g., a Census of Agriculture table subset to include only operations with a particular commodity of interest).

These requests can be for any NASS survey, but typically they are for the Census of Agriculture or ARMS data. The tabulations generally require staff time of a few days to a few weeks, and NASS usually provides them at no charge. A large increase in the number of requests is typically observed with the release of the Census of Agriculture. Before NASS provides data for the special tabulation to the requestor we perform a disclosure check to ensure the tabulation does not reveal any respondent's individual data. After we provide the data to the requestor, we add a note to the NASS webpage; the data are then available to any other requestor. As of November 17, NASS has received more than 85

special tabulation requests in 2014. We are completing these requests while conducting ongoing workloads.

*Requests for Unpublished Data.* Researchers from universities and government agencies can request access to unpublished data using NASS form ADM-042 (see attached). The data requested can be for farm or record level micro data or for unpublished aggregated data. Each request is reviewed at NASS for statistical methodology and for its benefit to agriculture. Reviewers have the opportunity to ask for clarification of the request and to recommend whether the request should be approved or any conditions should accompany an approval. The Chairperson of the Agricultural Statistics Board makes the final decision. As of November 17, NASS has received 75 data requests during 2014; 68 requests were approved.

For every approved project, a certification of confidentiality that unpublished data cannot be shared is signed by each person accessing the data. USDA agencies can be approved to access aggregate level data at their location. All other approved requests for aggregate level data and farm or record level data require the researcher to access data in a NASS Datalab. Prior to removing any data from the NASS Datalab, the data is checked by NASS for disclosure to protect the confidentiality of individual-level data.

*Memorandum of Understanding and Project Agreement.* The third method of accessing data is through an approved Memorandum of Understanding and Project Agreement. These agreements are used for requesting access to ARMS datasets. The ARMS surveys are co-sponsored projects between the Economic Research Service (ERS) and NASS. Both agencies review the requests and determine approval for access. Data for approved projects can be accessed in a NASS Datalab or through the NORC Data Enclave at the University of Chicago. The NORC Data Enclave allows researchers to access farm or record level data through a secure client machine at their location. The client machine acts as a remote terminal that gives researchers access to the data and statistical software to allow for full analysis but restricts their ability to remove data without authorization. Both the researchers and USDA pay fees for the service. The current fee for researchers is \$5,200 per year. As of November 17, NASS has reviewed 20 requests in 2014.

## **Issue**

Historically NASS Datalabs have been available in Washington, DC, and at each Field Office (FO). For approved projects, researchers can access farm or record level data at the Datalab and perform statistical analysis. When NASS reorganized to Regional Field Offices (RFOs) in 2013, it decided that Datalabs would be available in Washington, DC, and at each RFO, but would no longer be available at State FOs, since they no longer have space or staff to support a Datalab.

Since the reorganization, we have received requests to provide additional options for accessing data. Although many researchers now access data at the RFOs or Washington, DC, some researchers cannot easily travel to these locations. In response to these requests, we have been exploring options to assist researchers in securely accessing data.

## **Proposal**

We would like to explore expanding the datasets available through the NORC Data Enclave. This service provided by the University of Chicago provides an opportunity to access data in a secure environment. As described above, NORC provides an environment for accessing and analyzing the data without the ability to remove data without permission. In order to remove any data, the researchers

must notify NORC and be granted permission. NORC then communicates with NASS and we review the data to ensure that individual data are not provided.

NASS proposes utilizing a Memorandum of Understanding with the agency/university and a Project Agreement, similar to ARMS, for these additional datasets. As with each new ARMS agreement, for each of these new agreements, a NASS staff member would meet with the researcher to explain the researcher's responsibility in maintaining data confidentiality, witness the signing of the certification of confidentiality, and inspect where the data will be physically accessed.

NASS proposes to begin discussions with the NORC Data Enclave to expand the datasets available using their service to include the Census of Agriculture, data collected under reimbursable agreements, and other NASS- collected data.

**Discussion:** The Committee was interested in the topic and thought increasing access to the data would be beneficial for research and other activities; however concerns were also expressed with how individual confidentiality would be maintained. It was noted that with small specialty items it could be easy for someone with detailed knowledge in the area could identify individual producers. The committee felt that with declining response rates and the potential issues surrounding confidentiality that it would not be in the best interest of NASS to move forward with expanding the Data Enclave until NASS could ensure individual confidentiality of additional datasets.

## **9. Field Operation's Update**

Kevin Barnes, Director of Western Field Operations, gave an overview of Field Operations structure and status since the NASS reorganization. Mr. Barnes noted that resources are stretched thin and new staff members are being brought on board. Training of new staff and existing staff is underway as there have been changes in communications, methods and process, and new program areas. Mr. Barnes also noted the challenges of recruiting new hires with a background in agriculture and in additional agriculture training when recruits do not have an agricultural background.

**Discussion:** Topics of discussion following Mr. Barnes's presentation included questions regarding large or impact farms and if NASS was offering internships and participating in job fairs at agricultural colleges and universities. Mr. Barnes explained that NASS is working with State Statisticians to developing identifiers for large/impact farms and once identified they are working with those operations to develop a data collection plan. Mr. Barnes also noted that NASS currently offers internships and also participates in job fairs.

## **10. NASS Communications Plan**

Sue King, Staff Director of the Public Affairs Office, provided an overview of the services the Public Affairs Office provides and an overview of the agency communications plan. Ms. King noted the first agency communications plan was in July 2011 and detailed Strategies and successes that occurred from this plan. The three strategies discussed were cultivate consistent brand identity, position NASS as a contemporary agency and customize products. Ms. King detailed the strategies of the new agency communications plan, noting that the new plan builds upon what has already been accomplished. The new strategies of strengthen the NASS identity, strengthen customer relationships, improve data collection experience, improve data product presentation and accessibility. The committee was also provided a copy of the NASS communications plan prior to the meeting which is included in the appendix of this document.

**Discussion:** The committee discussed NASS communications that they had seen in the last few months noting the Thanksgiving graphic and the large number of like it had received through social media. The committee also discussed facts about a particular item could be highlighted every few questions during an electronic reporting of data. It was also noted that maps are well received and NASS could consider using more interactive maps. Ms. King noted that there was also a “Sweet Stats” Halloween graphic but that it did not receive the amount of attention from the media as the Thanksgiving graphic.

## **11. Primary Operator: Accurately Capturing Women and Beginning Farmers**

Chris Messer, Chief of the Census Planning Branch presented to the Advisory committee on Agriculture Statistics on the topic of Women operators and Beginning farmers. Chris covered how the data is currently being collected and published along with issues that have been brought to the attention of NASS on accurately counting women involved in agriculture on the farm, principal operator terminology and beginning farmers.

**Discussion:** The committee’s discussion on the topic highlighted the changing farm structure and how the increasingly complex structure makes it difficult for respondents to identify a primary operator. The term operator was also discussed with a focus on how the terminology is not something widely used by farmers and ranchers. Some suggestion on how NASS could better capture the farm structure were to consider asking type of operations (individual, partnership, etc) prior to the current questions of primary operator. The view of the committee was that this layout would resonate more with farmers and potentially provide more accurate results to the questions.

## **12. Public Comment Period**

The chairman of the committee noted and read into the record that 4 public comments had been received and provided to committee members for review prior to the meeting. Three of the four comments were related to the topic of accurately capturing women and beginning farmers. In addition to the written comments received two individuals provided public comments during the scheduled time period on the meeting agenda. One of which covered issues related to this topic.

Written comments were submitted by Beth Tharp, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Jean Public, and the National Young Farmers Coalition. Dr. Alan Hunt and Ms. Jackie Klippenstein provided public comments at the meeting. No public comments were received in the available period following the meeting. Written public comments are included in the appendix of this document.

Dr. Hunt provided comments on the data collected by the Census of Agriculture related to local and regional food activity. He explained what is currently available and proposed reformatting of the 2017 Census of Agriculture and new questions that should be added to better capture data on this growing sector of agriculture. Dr. Hunt also provided the committee with a handout which is included in the appendix of this document.

Discussion following Dr. Hunt's presentation noted that it is a rapidly changing environment and needs to be tracked and that NASS could work with other agency to better capture farmer's market information.

Ms. Klippenstein's comments highlighted the fact that current Census data measures female operators/owners but do not measure the contributions they provide to the operation. She also noted that perhaps we are not asking the right questions to provide the data stakeholders are looking for related to women operators. Ms. Klippenstein suggested that the more appropriate question may be what women's contributions to the farm operation are. She also noted the change in farmer's values with the younger generation returning to the farm and the desire to spend more time with families, and taking some rest and relaxation time away from the farm.

Discussion following Ms. Klippenstein's comments suggested that an organizational chart layout may help capture the changing complexity of farm structure and also provide more accurate information on women operators and beginning farmers. Another suggestion was to identify top jobs on a farm and ask who fills those roles.

## **13. Election of Advisory Committee Chairperson**

Mr. Carl Mattson and Mr. Roger Mix expressed interest in serving as the Chairperson of the committee. A vote was conducted by a ballot. Mr. Mattson was elected as Chairperson by majority vote of his fellow Committee members. A motion was made and received unanimous agreement that Mr. Mix would serve as the Vice Chairperson of the committee.

#### **14. Closing Remarks**

After the Committee discussed and passed its recommendations, Mr. Hamer and Mr. Reilly thanked Mr. Huebsch for serving as the Chairperson of the committee and presented Mr. Huebsch, Dr. Carroll, and Mr. Baise a plaque for their 3 terms of service on the Committee. Mr. Huebsch, as Committee Chairperson, called the meeting officially adjourned at 12:30 p.m. on Wednesday, December 3, 2014.

# ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE STATISTICS

## December 2014 RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation No. 1.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS examine ways to better capture the on farm contribution and participation of women farmers.

**Background:** The Census of Agriculture began collecting information on women farm operators in 1978. In 2002 the Census of Agriculture was expanded to cover characteristics for up to three operators. Little has changed in the collection and publication of operator characteristics from when the data series began in 1978 to the present. As farm structure and organization become more complex the role of women operators has also changed requiring additional detail to capture these characteristics and contributions.

**NASS Response:** NASS is organizing an external panel of experts to provide input and recommendations on additional data needs regarding the on farm contribution of women and beginning farmers and farm ownership structures. Applicable changes to data collection to support these data needs will be developed and tested for implementation in NASS surveys and the Census of Agriculture.

NASS is currently evaluating the functionality and usability of web survey instruments to increase response rates through online Census reporting. This assessment includes hiring of experts in the field of Mobile Technology to improve the overall effectiveness of web surveys, evaluation of recommendations from the NASS Census Content Team, incorporation of feedback from data user groups, and a NASS public relations campaign to increase respondent awareness of the option to complete surveys online. These efforts will improve online reporting, increase response rates, and improve the experience of respondents that are responding to all NASS surveys that are available online.

**Recommendation No. 2.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS consider a follow on survey to the 2017 Census of Agriculture that answers questions regarding young, beginning and socially disadvantaged farms. Challenges, success rates, future plans, land tenure, markets, diversity of production, productions practices, farm labor, and USDA program participation are all areas of interest.

**Background:** The Census of Agriculture began collecting information on race of the farm population in 1900. Over the years additional characteristics were collected and published in the Census of Agriculture. In 2002 the Census of Agriculture was expanded to cover characteristics for more up to three operators. Little has changed in the collection and publication of operator characteristics since 2002. As farm structure and organization become more complex and the age of the farm operator population continues to raise

details about the next generation of farm operators is increasingly important.

**NASS Response:** A special study could be developed and executed in FY2020. It would take the place of the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL) survey being conducted in 2015. Funds would need to be secured across two fiscal years – 2019 for planning and 2020 for processing and products.

**Recommendation No. 3.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS add clarity to the surveys, in the farmer entity or partnership name and operator name area. This will accommodate changing farm structures of ownership.

**Background:** Farm structure and organization is becoming increasingly complex as farm operations grow and diversify production. Many of these complex operations find it difficult to accurately report the structure of their operations on the Census of Agriculture Report Form.

**NASS Response:** NASS is organizing an external panel of experts to provide input and recommendations on additional data needs regarding the on farm contribution of women and beginning farmers and farm ownership structures. Applicable changes to data collection to support these data needs will be developed and tested for implementation in NASS surveys and the Census of Agriculture.

**Recommendation No. 4.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS continue work on increasing online Census reporting to increase response rates.

**Background:** The 2007 Census of Agriculture was the first time electronic data reporting was available and accounted for approximately 4 percent of all receipts. In 2012, the second availability of electronic reporting, approximately 12.5 percent of all receipts were received electronically.

**NASS Response:** NASS has contracted with a survey researcher at Washington State University (WSU) to test alternative versions of the Census of Agriculture report form. The intent of this work is to test the impact of potential alternatives to the form with respect to data quality and response. WSU will also provide best practices and guidelines for designing the online form.

NASS is currently evaluating the functionality and usability of web survey instruments to increase response rates through online Census reporting. This assessment includes hiring of experts in the field of Mobile Technology to improve the overall effectiveness of web surveys, evaluation of recommendations from the NASS Census Content Team,

incorporation of feedback from data user groups, and a NASS public relations campaign to increase respondent awareness of the option to complete surveys online. These efforts will improve online reporting, increase response rates, and improve the experience of respondents that are responding to all NASS surveys that are available online.

**Recommendation No. 5.** The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS include international certifiers in the survey of organic certifiers.

**Background:** NASS is planning to begin collecting data from organic certifiers in early 2016 for data related to the 2015 production year.

**NASS Response:** NASS can include the certifiers outside the US in the initial data request but has no authority for nonresponse follow-up other than telephone reminders. Advisory committee members expressed the importance of the international certifiers to the aquaculture industry and consumers of organic aquaculture since the USDA National Organic Program does not have standards for aquaculture.

**Recommendation No. 6.** The Advisory Committee recommends that aquaponics, vegetable hydroponics integrated with aquaculture be included in a NASS survey as early as appropriate.

**Background:** Data on aquaponics was collected on the 2013 Census of Aquaculture. Aquaponics were reported by 71 farms with 650 tanks from the Census of Aquaculture.

**NASS Response:** NASS needs to add this to the List Building Plans submitted by Regional Field Offices and make that a content discussion for the 2017 Census of Agriculture as well as either the Census of Aquaculture or Census of Horticultural Specialties special studies.

**Recommendation No. 7.** Based on the presentation during the Public Comment period the Advisory Committee recommends that NASS evaluate the inclusion and expansion of direct sales into the Census of Agriculture and partner with AMS and FNS.

**Background:** The Census of Agriculture began collecting information on agricultural products sold directly to individuals for human consumption in 1978. In 2012 the Census of Agriculture reported that 6.9 percent of farms sold agricultural precuts directly to individuals for human consumption.

**NASS Response:** NASS will explore the possibility of increasing the data for direct marketings.

**Recommendation No. 8.** The Advisory committee recommends that the marketing and outreach program be expanded and the budget increased. Survey response rates have been declining and high response rates are necessary for the efficacy of NASS results.

**Background:** The NASS mission is to provide timely, accurate, and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture. NASS accomplishes this mission by production quality data for decision making. Over the last several years farms have become increasingly diverse and complex. At the same time there has been an increasing demand for statistics. Lower response rates have a direct impact on the precision of data products produced by NASS. Marketing and outreach efforts conducted by NASS are essential to improving response rates and strengthening relationships with farm operators.

**NASS Response:** NASS agrees that its marketing and outreach program should be expanded and budget increased. We are working to hire specialists to broaden and customize local marketing and outreach to respondents and data users. As we implement our communications plan, which includes benchmarking and measuring the impacts of public affairs, additional funding will be needed and will be considered within the overall budget allocations.

**Recommendation No. 9.** The Advisory Committee recognizes the challenges of getting producer data and recommends that NASS not allow the expansion of the NORC Data Enclave to include Census of Agriculture information and we recommend NASS explore the feasibility to protect individual data.

**Background:** The reorganization at NASS has restricted the locations that researchers can access data in a secure NASS Data Lab setting. Previously NASS Data Labs were available in each Field Office, however with the reorganization the NASS Data Labs are now only available in Regional Field Offices. An option to support the sharing of information is to expand the data available in the NORC Data Enclave for approved projects.

**NASS Response:** NASS is dedicated to protecting individual data and has many safeguards to ensure that individual data is not discernible in publications. Researchers from other government agencies and universities can request to access record level unpublished data for statistical purposes. Projects are reviewed for their statistical methodology and service to the agricultural community, then considered for approval. Researchers are required to sign a certification that the data cannot be shared under any circumstances and violations can result in civil and criminal penalties. Disclosure checks are in place to ensure that record level or individually identifiable data is not released for public use.

The Research and Development Division of NASS can do a literature review for different methods of perturbing the data to enhance confidentiality in the record level data. During this review we will investigate the implications to the resulting data analysis and statistics and the feasibility of performing the perturbation on Census of Agriculture data.

## 15. Agenda

**Tuesday, December 2, 2014**

**Meeting at the NOC (Remember CST versus EST time zone differences)**

8:30 am CST (9:30 am ES)	Call to Order and Welcome	Doug Huebsch
8:35 am	Introductions	Hubert Hamer
8:50 am	Meeting Overview and ACAS Committee Overview	Hubert Hamer
9:00 am	2013 Recommendations Review and Report, Discussion	Hubert Hamer
9:30 am	Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area Remarks	Dr. Woteki
9:50 am	'State of NASS' Address	Joe Reilly
10:15 am	Discussion	
10:30 am	BREAK	
10:45 am	Census Programs	Chris Messer, Troy Joshua
11:15 am	2017 Census of Agriculture	Chris Messer
11:30 am	Discussion	
12:15 pm	Lunch	
1:15 pm	Response Rates and Respondent Relations *	Barbara Rater
2:00 pm	Discussion	
2:30 pm	Expanding the Data Enclave *	Christy Meyer, Mark Harris
3:00 pm	Discussion	
3:30 pm	BREAK	
3:45 pm	Field Operation's update	Kevin Barnes
4:15 pm	NASS Communications Plan	Sue King
4:45 pm	Discussion	
5:00 pm	Wrap Up	Hubert Hamer
5:15 pm	Adjourn and Shuttle Back to Hotel	
6:30 pm	Impromptu Evening Networking Event (not sponsored by NASS)	

\* - Issue and Options Papers provide to ACAS members ahead of meeting.

**Wednesday, December 3, 2014**

**Meeting at the Hotel**

8:00 am	Recap and Review of Previous Day	Hubert Hamer
8:15 am	Primary Operator: accurately capturing women and beginning farmers	Chris Messer
9:15 am	Discussion	
9:45 am	Public Comments	Doug Huebsch
10:15 am	BREAK	
10:30 am	Committee Requested Topics and Recommendations Discussions	Doug Huebsch
10:45 am	Discussion and Preliminary Drafting of Recommendations	Committee
11:45 pm	Presentation of Recommendations	Committee
12:15 pm	Wrap Up	Hubert Hamer
12:30 pm	Adjourn	

## 16. Appendix



November 20, 2014

# NASS Communications Plan: 2014-2017

## 1 BACKGROUND

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In July 2011, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) took its first step towards long-range strategic communications with the implementation of an agency communications plan. Developed under the guidance of the Communications Advisory Council, the plan aimed to improve data providers' and user' perceived value of NASS products and services. Many of its tactics were internally focused to build the cultural infrastructure and tools needed to accomplish the aim.

In the past three years, NASS made much progress and many communications achievements: cultivating a consistent identity; bridging the internal information gap; preparing for regional public affairs specialists; increasing our social media presence; and implementing a successful 2012 Census of Agriculture communications campaign. But our work is far from over. Our customers' and employees' perceived value of NASS products is still not where it should be.

The next agency communications plan will help move NASS to the next level in the next four years. It will continue to build on what we have accomplished while expanding focus on external audiences to try and raise the perceived value that we need as an agency to remain relevant as the leading source of agriculture statistics.

*At NASS we talk about creating a level playing field for producers with our data. In terms of communications, products, and tools – we are not on a level playing field in the market place. As an agency we need to excel and stay ahead of other data providers. An improved and usability-tested website, a website and products optimized for mobile devices, more social media and two-way communication, and other future-thinking tactics will help take us there.*

## 2 SITUATION ANALYSIS

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To assess our current situation, we surveyed NASS employees and customers to gauge their current perception of NASS. What we learned from them was both encouraging and, in some instances, alarming.

On the positive side, data users that responded to the survey: 1) consider NASS to be their primary source of data; 2) use our data frequently; and 3) use our data to make decisions for their organizations. On the negative side, we heard dissatisfaction among both audiences with our website.

From our analysis, much of our agency's energy is focused on the first two elements of our mission but we forget about the useful aspect. Data collection and release is how we measure much of our success, and it's even how we identify ourselves in our tagline "Agriculture Counts." But is it our entire job and does it resonate with our audience?

| 1 DRAFT



November 20, 2014

Our current positioning conveys what NASS does, but not why it matters. But our audiences want to know why we do what we do. It provides deeper understanding and context, things that our customers say they would like to see more of from our agency.

NASS exists to help make better decisions for agriculture and rural America. That’s why we collect data. This is a compelling “why.” This is the “why” that strengthens our brand and the agency identity. It all comes full circle.

With this comprehensive communications plan, we can modernize the way NASS is perceived, both internally and externally advancing agency cultural transformation, to better convey the immense value NASS data provide. Our improved agency communications will help pave the way for NASS to fulfill its mission of providing useful statistics.

### 3 PLAN GOAL

***INCREASE THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF NASS AND ITS PRODUCTS AMONG OUR EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS BY 2016.***

### 4 STRATEGIES

What	Why
Strengthen NASS identity	Our identity is our strongest asset. How we are known and perceived sets the tone for everything we do.
Strengthen customer relations	The more we know about our customers, the better we’ll be able to engage them. We still have much to learn about our customers and their expectations of us. This begins with a steadfast focus on our customers and the relationship we have with them; making it more two-way and less one-way.
Improve the data collection experience	We are not always on the cutting edge of data collection technology and must continue to modernize our data collection efforts to keep pace with the market and respondent expectations. We must work cohesively as an agency to ensure those charged with interacting with data providers are fully equipped with the tools and information to encourage response – how to respond; why this information is important; how it will be applied to benefit the respondent.
Improve data product accessibility and presentation	Our customers expect 1) easy access to NASS data; and 2) greater context and relevance to them.



## 5 STRATEGY NO. 1: STRENGTHEN THE NASS IDENTITY

### 5.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#7 – <i>USDA Data Leader</i> : Provide leadership for the USDA in data collection and publication of statistical information.	Proactively and consistently identify NASS as the statistical arm and data leader for USDA, both internally and externally.
#13 – <i>Expand NASS Job Series</i> : Identify and expand NASS job series to meet the expanding roles of the agency.	Assess the skills needed within our agency and what job series best fit those skills and re-evaluate field office staffing decisions based on the agency goals.

### 5.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in employee job satisfaction*</li> <li>▪ Increase media mentions (both traditional and social media)*</li> <li>▪ Stronger recall of NASS mission among stakeholders (Benchmark can be captured during an upcoming survey with the Federal Consulting Group through the University of Michigan)*</li> <li>▪ NASS Identity Dashboard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish NASS identity dashboard</li> <li>▪ Develop key messages to support the NASS identity that help clarify the agency’s identity for all audiences</li> <li>▪ Create standard materials and collateral tools to help communicate the agency’s key messages – ideas include, talking points, “About NASS” PPT presentation, brochure, etc.</li> <li>▪ Establish a position description for a regional public affairs specialist that would help maintain a unified coordinated NASS identity with skilled regional support</li> <li>▪ Conduct training in a tiered approach as needed to engage employees (i.e. senior managers; field staff; HQ staff; PAO staff; etc.) to ingrain our purpose and value in every employee and in everything we do (“living the brand”).</li> <li>▪ Create website and web content governance policy and identity guidelines. Establish a council or working group to review and oversee the content and identity of the NASS website and all virtual products and tools.</li> <li>▪ Evaluate and reconsider types and purpose of templates for field and regional offices</li> <li>▪ Distribute an E-newsletter to data subscribers providing quick snippets of recently released reports, data, and upcoming surveys, reports, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Execute a proactive media outreach plan</li> <li>▪ Develop and implement an editorial calendar</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Execute the Communications Advisory Council Consistent Identity Task Force plan to rollout and fully implement PSM-5</li> <li>Develop a communications plan for the 2017 Census of Agriculture to cohesively integrate the Census program and NASS agency messaging. As appropriate, the plan will address list building, data collection, and data release and will help strengthen the connection between NASS and the Census for respondents and data users. (See 11 – Appendix for additional information)</li> </ul>
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\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 6 STRATEGY NO. 2: STRENGTHEN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

### 6.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#2 – <i>Customer-Centric Organization</i> : Establish a customer-centric approach to continually improving our data products and delivery.	Create an ongoing program to identify and understand our various audiences with specific needs and capabilities, including non-traditional customers and those involved in emerging issues.
#3 – <i>Strengthen Partnerships</i> : Expand interaction and strengthen partnerships with other government agencies, external stakeholders, Congress, industry groups, and other organizations.	Increase work with USDA partners, stakeholders, industry, and others to increase collaborative opportunities and help ensure a renewed, dedicated focus on partnerships.

### 6.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in speaker invitations at industry events, such as trade shows, meetings, conferences, etc.*</li> <li>Increase positive mentions of NASS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey customers to define segments, expectations, and their relations relative to NASS</li> <li>Engage the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics on key issues pertaining to the agency’s communications activities and how it reaches its customers. Possibly establish a communications subgroup to have a frequent sounding board and dialogue as NASS implements this communications plan.</li> <li>Create an annual customer outreach awards program and add</li> </ul>



<p>data*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in number of organizations willing to support NASS surveys and encourage participation*</li> </ul>	<p>as an element for spot awards for employees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluate the NASS trade show and events calendar on a routine basis to ensure participation at events best reflects the agency's current communications needs. Proactively seek out opportunities for NASS to participate in event panels and sessions to present information on NASS programs and products.</li> <li>Provide regular senior management outreach with stakeholders and media to solidify their presence as NASS spokespeople and leaders in the industry.</li> <li>Develop a communications platform for customer representatives to have open lines of communications with NASS in order to present their priorities and needs (i.e. additional data user meetings, one-on-one meetings, online forums, etc.) [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>Create more forums to help key constituencies kept abreast of NASS surveys and products and provide more opportunities for two-way communications, ideas include hosting webinars, Google+ Hangouts, Twitter chats, etc.</li> </ul>
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\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 7 STRATEGY NO. 3: IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION EXPERIENCE

### 7.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#1 – <i>Respondent-Centric Organization</i> : Become a more "respondent-centric" organization by implementing strategies to improve the data collection experience for respondents.	Improve the quality, support development, and promote the use of electronic data collection. Additionally focus communications on the benefits of data and the central role of respondents in data collection.
#4 – <i>Effectively Leverage Research</i> : Establish a more effective, transparent link between Agency research and operational programs.	Increase communication and collaboration with RDD to submit research requests to address concerns that previously have been overlooked. Through the contributions of research, improve the overall quality of our products and programs.

## 7.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in percentage of survey responses online*</li> <li>▪ Decrease in customer service call and email logs for assistance filling out surveys*</li> <li>▪ Increase in positive-tone stories about NASS*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use various research methods including cognitive interviews, split-sample tests, usability experience tests (including eye tracking), etc. to improve and establish communications best practices and standards for NASS products and tools.</li> <li>▪ Focus more activities on electronic response and communication, including: communicating with survey respondents via email; collecting emails as part of the survey to help move the agency towards an email “mail list” – especially for those most likely to respond via EDR.</li> <li>▪ Equip enumerators both in the field and on the phone with how to positively position surveys to encourage response – provide stories of “how” the data are used.</li> <li>▪ Generate a library of stories media involving key decisions that were made using NASS data and proactively pitch them to the</li> <li>▪ Publicize process improvements and results along the way to customers.</li> </ul>

\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 8 STRATEGY NO. 4: IMPROVE DATA PRODUCT PRESENTATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

### 8.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#2 – <i>Customer-Centric Organization</i> : Establish a customer-centric approach to continually improving our data products and delivery.	Enhance data products and delivery based on customer needs and audiences. Educate our user community on the availability and breadth of the data NASS provides and <i>how</i> it relates to information, programs, funding provided by others.
#7 – <i>USDA Data Leader</i> : Provide leadership for the USDA in data collection and publication of statistical information.	Increase relevance to policy issues and support the continual development, wide distribution and easy access to more useful data.

## 8.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase subscriber list*</li> <li>▪ Decrease negative and increase positive feedback on Quickstats*</li> <li>▪ Decrease in customer service call and email logs*</li> <li>▪ Increase in social media impact*</li> <li>▪ Improved Customer satisfaction rates*</li> <li>▪ Increase in the number of repeat visits to the NASS website*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Institute new and/or expanded best practices and standards for data products, both print and web/virtual formats.</li> <li>▪ Revamp the NASS website look, organization, writing and 508 compliance to engage visitors and enhance the user experience to invite increased interest in NASS products</li> <li>▪ Provide more tools and resources to improve the usability and user experience of Quickstats. For communications, this could include hosting webinars on using Quickstats, providing more plain language instructional tips, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Initiate ongoing internal training on researching, accessing and providing context to NASS Data, making each employee a “data expert” at an appropriate level.</li> <li>▪ Provide downloadable templates to field and regional public affairs specialists for their use, such as reports, infographics, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Proactively find opportunities for SMEs to provide context for data</li> <li>▪ Optimize the NASS website for a full mobile experience</li> <li>▪ Execute a customer satisfaction survey to benchmark our customers’ experience and evaluate results</li> <li>▪ Integrate internal and external usability testing into all web products before, during and after launch.</li> </ul>

\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 9 PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

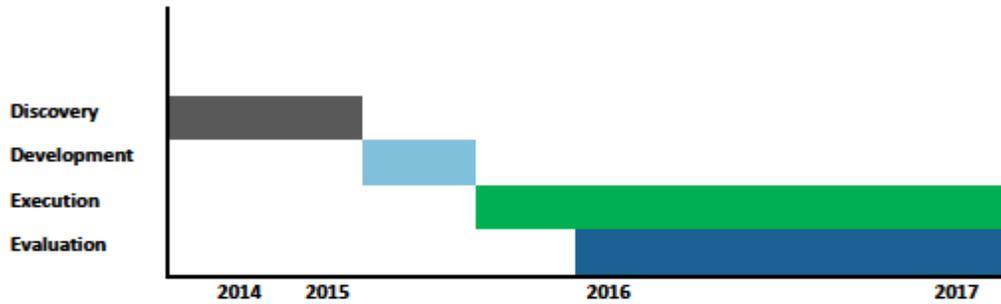
This is as a four-year plan built around the following phases of implementation:

- **Discovery** – We still have much to learn about our target audiences and their expectations. This phase of the plan is intended to fill in the critical gaps between what we know, what we think and what we don’t know.
- **Development** – Armed with fresh intelligence from the discovery period, the development phase is defined largely by creating communications resources and other initiatives to help us connect with our targets. This is when we tackle message development, tools and training programs.
- **Execution** – This phase is when we begin to bring our new messages to our customers and the marketplace.
- **Evaluation** – This communication plan is organic and may change over time. As a result, this phase works in tandem with the execution period. Evaluation and measurement will inform



revisions to the plan along the way. The identity dashboard will be created to track progress against the key performance indicators.

### 9.1 IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE



## 10 BENCHMARK AND EVALUATION

- Conduct a Foresee Survey on the NASS website during the Discovery Phase to establish benchmarks and strategic goals leading to the improved perceived value of NASS products among its customers. Repeat the Foresee Survey during the Evaluation Phase to measure the impact.
- Use the Internal Survey of NASS Data User Attitude Survey conducted in July 2014 as the benchmark for employee’s perceived value of NASS products. Repeat the survey during the Evaluation Phase to measure the results.
- Use the new Federal Consulting Services survey to measure external customer satisfaction with NASS, our products and our services. Repeat each year.
- Use elements of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to measure internal employee satisfaction with the tools they have to do their jobs.
- Use the Identity Dashboard to track progress against key performance indicators.



November 20, 2014

## 11 APPENDIX – 2017 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE COMMUNICATIONS

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In addition to the phases of implementation for enhancing our agency communications efforts, a separate plan will be created to promote the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The Census of Agriculture plan will be implemented simultaneously with the agency plan and will include tactics aimed list building, building awareness, encouraging response, thanking respondents and showcasing results and trends to data users during Census data release.

- **Partnership Development** - NASS formed and enhanced many valuable relationships with agricultural and community-based organizations during the 2007 and 2012 Census of Agriculture. Staff maintained these relationships through stakeholder communications and follow-up contacts. We will build on those relationships and foster new partnerships for the 2017 Census.
- **Field Office Outreach** - Our field offices are our direct line to farmers and ranchers who are called on to participate in the Census of Agriculture. We will provide them with tools and training to help them better encourage participation in the Census at a local level.
- **Communications and Media Outreach Plan** – As the Census planning team works to target key demographics for participation, we will develop paid and earned media strategies focused on those populations. This plan will include public relations, social media and other marketing elements, in addition to an editorial calendar specific to pitching Census-relevant stories and interviews. The content will also be available to the field offices for local placement.
- **Collateral Materials** - Promotional materials will be updated to reflect the new NASS creative branding. These will be tailored to fit all stages of the 2017 Census promotion, for national use and use by individual states or data provider groups.
- **CAC Communications** – Engagement sessions will be established throughout the 2017 Census of Agriculture planning and promotion to involve the CAC and leverage individual expertise and feedback.

## 16.1 Public Comments

**From:** jean public [<mailto:jeanpublic1@gmail.com>]  
**Sent:** Sunday, November 16, 2014 3:19 PM  
**To:** [hubert.hamer@naas.usda.gov](mailto:hubert.hamer@naas.usda.gov); Od, Hq Sd - NASS; AGSEC - OES; INFO; media; [INFO@njtaxes.org](mailto:INFO@njtaxes.org); [info@afphq.org](mailto:info@afphq.org)  
**Subject:** Fwd: time to start charging agribusiness for this free service - theyve been leaching off taxpayers to pay for their info for centuries now

Subject: time to start charging agribusiness for this free service - theyve been leaching off taxpayers to pay for their info for centuries now

PUBLIC COMMENT ON FEDERAL REGISTER

THE FATAL FLAW IN THIS COMMITTEE IS THAT THIS IS A GROUP OF ALL INSIDERS ALL WITH THE SAME OBJECTIVE TO MAKE THEMSELVES AS RICH AS CAN BE WHILE TAXING THE REST OF AMERICA TO THE HILT FOR THEIR OVERSPENDING. ITS TIME TO BALANCE THAT. ITS TIME TO STOP THAT OVERSPENDING. THERE IS NO BRAKE ON WHAT THIS GROUP OF SELF INTERESTED INSIDERS WANTS TO SPEND. NOBODY TELLS THEM NO SO THEY COME UP WITH OUTLANDISH PLANS TO SPEND. CONGRESS ITSELF IS SAYING THEY GET TOO MANY REPORTS TO READ. ITS CLEAR THAT THERE IS TOO MUCH SPENDING AT NASS. ITS ALSO TIME TO GET THE AG COMMUNITY TO PAY UP FOR THIS INFORMATION INSTEAD OF MAKING IT FREE FOR THE TAKING AND LETTING US ALL PAY FOR IT. THIS IS INDISUTRY INFORMATION. PAY FOR IT YOURSELVES. I AM IN FAVOR OF ALL COMITTEES LIKE THIS HAVING BALANCE SO THAT THOSE IN INDUSTRY WHO SEEK TO SPEND TO PROFIT THEMSELVES UNDERSTAND THAT THERE ARE MANY IN OTHER BUSINESSES WHO WANT A BRAKE ON SPENDING. THIS COMM,ENT IS FOR HT EPUBLI CDRECORD. PLEASE RECEIPT. JEAN PUBLI [JEANPUBLIC1@YAHOO.COM](mailto:JEANPUBLIC1@YAHOO.COM)>

**From:** Beth Tharp [<mailto:btharp@leganlivestock.com>]  
**Sent:** Friday, November 21, 2014 8:18 AM  
**To:** Od, Hq Sd - NASS  
**Cc:** McFarland, Lilia - OSEC  
**Subject:** Re: Stakeholder on the Topic of Women Farm Operators comments

Hubert,

When I spoke with Lilia on this topic she mentioned there were only three spaces on the census to list farm operators. In our farm's case we have four owner/operators with 2 being women. By tradition we list the men's names first, so one of the women will be left off of the census.

Also, what would it look like to specifically ask for women operators on the census?

Let me know if I can be of any more assistance.

Thanks,

Beth Tharp  
Legan Livestock & Grain, Inc.  
(765)720-3950

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November 26, 2014

Hubert Hamer  
Executive Director, Agricultural Statistics Board  
National Agricultural Statistics Service  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20250-0321

Dear Mr. Hamer:

In response to your email, I would like to thank you for reaching out and soliciting input from the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) as you work to develop the 2017 Census of Agriculture. We agree that more information is needed on beginning farmers and ranchers to better understand their operations, profitability, and overall success.

As you may be aware, NSAC is a national alliance of 40 family farm, food, rural, and conservation organizations that together take common positions on federal agriculture and food policies to advance sustainable agriculture – including policies related to beginning farmers and ranchers.

In anticipation of the upcoming meeting of NASS's Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics, we submit the following recommendations and ideas for valuable data that could be addressed by future NASS data collection activities.

**We recommend that NASS include specific questions on either the 2017 Census of Agriculture, or on a follow up survey, to collect more comprehensive and robust data to better understand:**

**1. Primary challenges that new and aspiring farmers face**

There have been several efforts to collect data on the most significant barriers facing new and aspiring farmers, however none of these activities has the national breadth or reliability of NASS's Census of Agriculture. We therefore think that it would be extremely useful to include questions on the next Census, or on a specific follow on survey that is sent to all beginning farmers who complete the 2017 Census, that seek to collect data on the primary challenges that beginning farmers face both *before* they start farming, and *during their first ten years* of farming.

This is an important distinction, as some challenges, such as access to farmland or credit, may be an initial challenge that postpones an aspiring farmer's career until they can find (and afford) farmland to rent or purchase. And other challenges, such as access to crop insurance or reliable markets, may be ongoing issues that continue to impact the future success and profitability of their farming operation in their first ten years as they build their business.

110 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 209 • Washington, DC 20002-5622  
p (202) 547-5754 f (202) 547-1837 • [www.sustainableagriculture.net](http://www.sustainableagriculture.net)

## **2. Success rate of new operations**

Although previous Censuses of Agriculture have collected reliable data on the demographics of beginning farmers (those farming less than ten years), it is much more challenging to understand the success rate of those who start farming during one Census year, and whether or not they are still farming when the next Census is conducted.

This gap in longitudinal data on the performance, profitability, and ongoing challenges of beginning farmers requires much more comprehensive research than is available through the Census of Agriculture or other NASS activities. However, these mechanisms can be useful in capturing data on how many beginning farmers are still farming from one Census to the next and how many are no longer farming. A follow on survey that dives more deeply into specific issues that pertain to beginning farmers (such as challenges, resources, future plans for expansion, etc) would be a very useful tool – specifically to collect information from those who were not able to make their farming operation work to better understand some of the challenges that new farmers face that impede their future success.

Evaluating this metric over time would provide valuable insight into the success rate of new farming operations (similar to the success rate of new businesses) and allow policymakers and other stakeholders to better understand these challenges and find ways to address them.

## **3. Future plans for expansion, growth, and profitability**

Similar to questions asked of organic farmers on NASS's Organic Production Survey, it would be valuable to gather information from beginning farmers about their future production plans in order to better understand growth opportunities and trends for new farming operations. For example, it would be valuable to understand what crops, as well as markets and supply chains, beginning farmers are able to access during their early years of farming, and what their plans are for growing their farm business over the years (i.e. diversifying products grown, pursuing additional markets, installing cold storage so they can sell year-round to local markets).

It would be useful to understand both short and long-term plans for growth, and also assess and track a beginning farmer's profitability over their first ten years. Specifically, it would be helpful to understand which types of operations and production systems are more profitable than others, such as small diversified CSA operations compared with specialized grain or single commodity production systems, organic compared with conventional products, and local or direct compared with national or wholesale markets.

## **4. Land Tenure**

Little data is currently collected on land tenure practices, and trends regarding how new farmers acquire the land they are farming. We would therefore recommend that NASS not only collect data on whether beginning farmers own or lease the land that they farm, but also more detailed information on how these farmers acquired or located land to farm. For example, it knowing the most useful mechanisms for how new farmers acquire land, such as through land-link programs, a inherited or purchased from a family member, or through federal easement or conservation programs, would allow policies and resources to be better targeted to reflect these trends.

## 5. Markets

Better information on the specific markets that beginning farmers sell their products to. This can include both geographic markets (i.e. local, regional, national, international) and type and size of supply-chain (i.e. direct-to-consumer, direct-to-retail, institutional, wholesale, aggregator, etc).

## 6. Diversity of Agricultural Products

In order to better understand new farmer trends, it is important to understand what their farmers look like and what they grow or raise. More information and analysis is needed on the specific types and number of crops grown and livestock raised by beginning farmers compared with more established farmers. Some of this information may already be collected in previous Censuses of Agriculture, and if so, NASS in partnership with ERS should conduct a comprehensive regional analysis of what new operations look like across the country -- both in terms of the crops and livestock they grown, but also how they diversify their operations with the types of products they sell and markets they serve.

## 7. Production Practices

While there is an assumption that younger and newer farmers are more interested in sustainable production systems (such as organic or pastured livestock), there is little data to ground this claim. In designing programs and making resources available to beginning farmers, it would therefore be incredibly useful to have concrete data on specific management practices in order to understand if beginning farmers are more likely to specialize in organic, integrated pest management, cover-cropping, rotational-grazing, or other conservation or sustainable farming practices than more established farmers.

It would also be interesting to track these trends across the entire farming population, and while questions are asked on the Census of Agriculture to obtain some of this data, like organic, there is little data on more comprehensive production practices.

## 8. Farm Labor

Access to farm labor is essential for any farming operation to succeed – especially for farms that wish to scale up in size in order to take advantage a growing market for the products they grow or raise. However, there is little comprehensive data on the specific types of labor that are employed on any given farm and the extent that access to qualified farm labor poses a barrier to a farm's growth or success.

NASS should therefore include questions on the upcoming Census or follow on survey that seek to collect data on what percentage of total farm labor on a beginning farmer's operation is provided by the primary operator, spouse, relatives, apprentices, or seasonal workers, and which of these positions are paid or unpaid.

It would also be helpful to understand how easy it is for new farmers to find – and be able to afford – sufficient and qualified labor in different states across the country. If collected, this would allow stakeholders and policymakers to better assess whether access to labor is a significant barrier for new farmers, and if so, what sector of agriculture and which part of the country this is more of an issue than others.

## 9. Participation in USDA Programs

If a follow on survey is conducted, it would be helpful to include a question that asks beginning farmers to identify which, if any, federal programs they have participated in (or are applied to). These could include federal FSA loan programs, NRCS conservation programs like EQIP or CSP, Rural Development's value-added producer grants, or technical assistance through Extension or NRCS.

Conversely, since most agencies segregate program usage for beginning farmers, it may be possible for ERS to obtain existing information from USDA agencies and publish in a separate report.

This information is vital in understanding not only which programs are most suited to meet the needs of new farmers, but also how successful new farmers are in competing or obtaining federal funding compared with more established farmers who may not need the financial assistance to the same extent that new farmers do.

## 10. Production, Marketing, and Financial Skills

Finally, it would be helpful to know beginning farmers acquire the specific skills that are needed to ensure the success of any farm operation – such as production, marketing, or financial skills. We frequently hear from our members that farmers find training programs (such as those funded through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program) to be extremely valuable in transferring these skills, but we do not know what percentage of new farmers are participating in these programs compared with skills obtained through family members, mentors, technical colleges, or four-year degrees. This information is important to understand the best mechanisms in reaching new farmers in order to ensure they have the technical skills they need to build a successful farming operation.

Additional questions could also gather data to assess whether beginning farmers have adequate health insurance coverage and what kind and amount of financial debt they carried when they started farming (i.e. credit card, student loan) and to what extent that created a barrier in obtaining additional credit or starting their farming operation.

We thank you for serious consideration of our recommendations, and would welcome any additional feedback we can provide.

Sincerely,



Ferd Hoefner  
Policy Director  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition



Juli Obndzinski  
Senior Policy Specialist  
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition



November 25, 2014

Hubert Hamer  
Director, NASS Statistics Division  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 5433 South Building  
Washington, DC 20250

**RE: Comments on Measuring Women and New Farmers in the Census of Agriculture**

Dear Mr. Hamer:

The National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) appreciates the opportunity to offer comments to the National Agriculture Statistics Service's Advisory Committee on Agricultural Statistics. We share NASS's concern that the number and role of women and new farmers may be underrepresented in the Census of Agriculture. We are excited to hear the NASS and the Advisory Committee are taking steps to address this problem.

NYFC represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers to ensure their success. We envision a country where young people who are willing to work, get trained and take a little risk can support themselves and their families in farming. NYFC has 24 local chapters across the country and represents almost 1,000 members.

As an organization that represents new farmers, many of who are women, NYFC has spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the problem of counting the number and measuring the contribution of these farmers. In order to better reflect the reality of farming operations on the ground, we propose changing the way that NASS asks about primary, second, and third operators in the Census. In addition, we would like to see NASS begin to collect panel data on new farmers. Finally, we encourage NASS to use partnerships as a tool for data collection.

**NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION**

PO BOX 1079 HUNTSVILLE, NY 12550 917-518-1988 YOUNGFARMERS.ORG

### **Changing the Meaning of “Primary” Operator**

We are concerned that there is a mismatch between the Census form, the Census data analysis, and the actual make-up of farms. The Census form asks for the respondent to specify a “Principal Operator or Senior Partner.” While this field could mean the individual who provides the bulk of labor or decision-making on the farm, it could also be interpreted to mean the most elder owner. Asking if the primary operator is retired further complicates this. If, for example, the primary operator is meant to be the person providing the bulk of labor or management, how could they also be retired from the operation?

The Census data analysis, conducted by NASS, clearly places some importance on this “Primary Operator” election. While some statistics are reported for all farmers, some tables only compare primary operators. In addition, when some statistics are quoted, such as the average age of a farmer, the primary operator data is used, even though data on all operators is available. Clearly, those using the data place more importance on this designation than a reading of the form would suggest is justified.

There is also a mismatch between the form, the data, and the way that farms are actually managed on the ground. Family farms are often a partnership between family members. In some cases one person may be taking the lead. However, decisions may also be made collective. The Census is not designed to gather data on collectively management. This is particularly problematic when measuring women or young farmers, who are less likely to be listed as the “Primary Operator.” Both women and young people are likely to defer to older men when asked which name to list first, even if they are providing an equal amount of labor or management.

Rather than asking farmers to arbitrarily elect a “Primary Operator” – a position that may not actually exist on the farm – NASS should look for better ways to quantify the actual work done by operators on a farm. The current Census asks about the number of days that an operator worked at an off-farm job. It would also be informative to ask how much time the operator actually spends working on the farm. In addition, the Census should ask about the proportion of management provided by each operator. If partners provided equal management, that would be reflected in the Census data for the first time. This would allow NASS to provide statistics about demographics and production – much as it does now – but cross-tabulated by the actual amount of management and time an operator spends working on the farm, rather than an arbitrary determination of “primary,” “second,” and “third” operator.

### **Panel Data**

Beginning farmers are very difficult for NASS to count. Comparing fluctuations in the data on beginning farmers year-to-year, it is difficult to tell whether farmers have aged out of the “beginning farmer” category, dropped out of farming altogether, or whether NASS has just been more or less accurate

## **NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION**

PO BOX 1079 HUDSON, NY 12534 917-518-1988 YOUNGFARMERS.ORG

measuring them than before. The current data collection strategy is simply not working for this type of farmer.

We recommend that NASS begin collecting panel data on beginning farmers in concert with the Census of Agriculture. Collected on a sample of the beginning farmer population, panel data would allow NASS to track how this group of farmers changes over time. Inconsistencies between the panel and the overall Census numbers would also help NASS to better understand where data collection on this population is falling short.

Panel data would be a significant departure from the way NASS collects data and conducts the Census currently. However, the Census is not providing either a full or accurate picture of this population. More information is needed if we are to address this systemic problem with the Census. Panel data would provide this information.

#### **Partnerships for Data Collection**

Many young farmers may not have come into contact with USDA in the past. As a result, these farmers may not be on the Census distribution list. However, community-based organizations and non-profits, like NYFC, serve many young farmers that USDA is not reaching. These organizations and their networks are a critical resource for outreach and marketing. We encourage NASS to pursue partnerships and cooperative agreements with these CBOs and nonprofits.

We commend NASS and the Advisory Committee for engaging stakeholders on the critical issue of measuring women and young farmers. We look forward to continuing the work with NASS to ensure that its data reflects the true diversity in agriculture.

Sincerely,



Lindsey Lusher Shute  
Executive Director



Eric Hansen  
Policy Analyst

#### **NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION**

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## ***Proposal: Use Market Diversification to Track Local and Regional Food Activity***

### *WHY*

- 6% of farms use direct sales. By comparison vegetable and dairy farms represent 6% of US farms
- If direct sales were a commodity...
  - #5 by number of farms in 2007
  - #4 by number of farms in 2012
- \$8.1 billion in 2007/2008 farm sales from diversified marketing channels – organic, direct, and “best guess” for local and regional
  - More than cotton and rice sales in 2007 (\$6.1 billion)
- More than 8,000 farmers’ markets, yet no data on number of farmers using markets
- Direct sales compliments other marketing – Total sales of farms w/ direct sales \$8.7B in 2007
- No standard definition for “local” or regional” (nor is there meant to be one)
- Producers more knowledgeable about marketing choices than final product destination and use

### *WHAT THE CENSUS TRACKS*

- Direct to consumer sales for human consumption (excludes value-added products – ham, jam, cheese)
- Direct to retail (includes restaurants) – no sales, only # of farms
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – no sales, only # of farms
- Organic (certified and exempt) – inconsistent question wording between 2002, 2007, and 2012
- Related: Value-added (includes sales), agritourism (includes sales)

### *SUGGESTIONS*

A) Identify the scope/sales of the local and regional food sector with a Census of Agriculture “follow-on” survey

B) Focus on the Census of Agriculture to build consistent, comparable data on activities that relate to local and regional food systems

#### **Proposed Minimum for 2017 Census of Agriculture (Page 2)**

1. Reformat questionnaire to allow reporting for 3 main marketing channels: direct sales, direct to retail sales, and intermediated (wholesale) sales (this category can be added later)
2. Introduce at least 6 new fields
  - Value of all direct sales, including value-added (2 fields)
  - Value of sales at farmers markets (2 fields)
  - Value of direct to retail sales (1 field)
  - Value of CSA sales (1 field)
3. Other reporting changes (e.g. increase sales ranges on direct sales, etc. in Hunt & Matteson 2012)

#### **Gradual Expansion (Page 3)**

**SECTION 31 LAND USE PRACTICES**

1. During 2012, considering the total acres on this operation -

How many acres were drained by tile?	None	Number of Acres
a. How many acres were drained by tile?	300	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. How many acres were artificially drained by ditches?	301	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. How many acres were under a conservation easement?	302	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. On how many cropland acres were no-till practices used?	303	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. On how many cropland acres were conservation tillage, excluding no-till, practices used?	304	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. On how many cropland acres were conventional tillage practices used?	305	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. How many cropland acres were planted to a cover crop? Exclude CRP acres.	306	<input type="checkbox"/>

**SECTION 32 PRACTICES**

1. At any time during 2012, did this operation -

a. Receive irrigation water supplied by a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation project or facility? Include reclamation water delivered by a local district.	1722	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
b. Practice rotational or management-intensive grazing?	1725	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
c. Produce and sell value added crops, livestock, or products such as beef, pork, fruit, jams, jelly, preserves, cider, wine, etc?	1726	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
d. Market products through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangement?	1727	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
e. Raise or sell veal calves?	1728	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
f. Practice alley cropping or silvopasture?	1729	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
g. Harvest any biomass (crop residue, grasses, woody biomass, etc.) for use in the production of renewable energy? Exclude grains, oilseeds, and firewood.	1730	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
h. Market products directly to retail outlets (including restaurants, grocery stores, schools, hospitals, or other businesses) that in turn sell directly to consumers?	1731	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No
i. Have an on-farm packing facility for distributing vegetables, potatoes, fruit, nuts, berries or other crops?	1732	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	No

**SECTION 33 DIRECT SALES FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION**

During 2012, did you produce, raise, or grow any crops, livestock, poultry, or agricultural products that were sold directly to individual consumers for human consumption?

**INCLUDE - sales from**

- produce stands
- farm stands
- food your own
- door to door, etc.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

**EXCLUDE**

- craft items
- products such as cheese
- butter, jelly, sausage, and jams
- wine and cider

1489  Yes - Gross value of these direct sales ..... \$ 0.00

1410 Specify product(s) →

3  No - Go to SECTION 34

**SECTION 33 MARKETING CHANNEL USE**

1. At any time during 2012 did this operation market products directly to retail outlets (including restaurants, grocery stores, schools, hospitals, or other businesses) that in turn directly sell to consumers?	Yes	No	Value of Sales (dollars)
<b>DIRECT TO RETAIL SALES</b>			New
<b>DIRECT TO CONSUMER SALES</b>			New
1. At any time during 2012 did this operation produce and sell products directly to consumers, including value-added crops, livestock, or products, such as beef, jerky, fruit jams, jelly, preserves, floral arrangements, cider, wine, etc?	New		New
2. During 2012, did you produce, raise or grow any crops, livestock, poultry, or agricultural products sold directly to individual consumers for human consumption? (excluding value-added and processed products)			
(If Yes, Specify product(s))		box	
3. At any time during 2012 did this operation market products through a			New
a. Community Supported Agriculture			New
b. Farmer's market	New		New

Reorganize, add 2 new questions, and add sales to 2 existing questions

**SECTION 31 LAND USE PRACTICES**

1. During 2012, considering the total acres on this operation –

	None	Number of Acres
a. How many acres were drained by tile?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
b. How many acres were artificially drained by ditches?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
c. How many acres were under a conservation easement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
d. On how many cropland acres were no-till practices used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
e. On how many cropland acres were conservation tillage, excluding no-till, practices used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
f. On how many cropland acres were conventional tillage practices used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	
g. How many cropland acres were planted to a cover crop? Exclude CRP acres.	<input type="checkbox"/>	

**SECTION 32 PRACTICES**

1. At any time during 2012, did this operation –

a. Receive irrigation water supplied by a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation project or facility? Include reclamation water delivered by a local district.	1722	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
b. Practice rotational or management-intensive grazing?	1726	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
c. Produce and sell value added crops, livestock, or products such as beef jerky, fruit jams, jelly, preserves, floral arrangements, cider, wine, etc.?	1728	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
d. Market products through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangement?	1727	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
e. Raise or sell veal calves?	1729	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
f. Practice alley cropping or silvopasture?	1731	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
g. Harvest any biomass (crop residue, grasses, woody biomass, etc.) for use in the production of renewable energy? Exclude grains, oilseeds, and growwood	1730	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
h. Market products directly to retail outlets (including restaurants, grocery stores, schools, hospitals, or other businesses) that in turn sell directly to consumers?	1735	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No
i. Have an on-farm packing facility for distributing vegetables, potatoes, fruit, nuts, berries or other crops?	1732	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No

**SECTION 33 DIRECT SALES FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION**

During 2012, did you produce, raise, or grow any crops, livestock, poultry, or agricultural products that were sold directly to individual consumers for human consumption?

**INCLUDE - sales from**

- roadside stands
- farmers markets
- pick your own
- door to door sale
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

**EXCLUDE**

- craft farms
- processed products such as cheese, butter, jelly, sausages, and jams
- wine and cider

1429  Yes - Gross value of these direct sales ..... 0000

1430  No - Go to SECTION 34

Specify product(s) → 1410

Value of Sales (dollars) \$ 0000

**SECTION 33 MARKETING CHANNEL USE**

**WHOLESALE MARKETS**

	Yes	No	Value of Sales (dollars)
1. At any time during 2012 did this operation market products through wholesale outlets?			New
a. Distributor, wholesaler, broker, or processor?			New
b. Processor, mill, or packer?			New
c. Conventional supermarket chain buyer?			New
d. Natural food store chain buyer?			New
e. Grower cooperative?			New
f. Sales to other farm operators?			New
g. Other wholesale – please specify (box)			New
2. Were any of products sold through these channels through a written contract?			New

**DIRECT TO RETAIL SALES**

1. At any time during 2012 did this operation sell products directly to retail outlets (including restaurants, grocery stores, schools, hospitals, or other businesses) that in turn directly sell to consumers?			New
a. Restaurants or caterers?			New
b. Conventional supermarkets?			New
c. Institutions (e.g. hospitals, schools)?			New
d. Other direct to retail – please specify (box)			New
2. Were any of products sold through these channels through a written contract?			New

**DIRECT TO CONSUMER SALES**

1. At any time during 2012 did this operation sell products directly to consumers, including value-added crops, livestock, or products, such as beef jerky, fruit jams, jelly preserves, floral arrangements, cider, wine, etc.?			New
2. During 2012, did you produce, raise or grow any crops, livestock, poultry, or agricultural products sold directly to individual consumers for human consumption? (excluding value-added and processed products)			
If Yes, Specify product(s) (box)			
3. At any time during 2012 did this operation market products through a:			(box)
a. Community Supported Agriculture			Sales New
b. Farmers markets			Sales New
c. On-site (e.g. farm stand, U-Pick)			New
d. Mail order or internet			New
e. Other consumer direct – please specify (box)			New

2008 Organic Production Survey Questionnaire

<b>SECTION 8</b>		<b>MARKETING PRACTICES FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTS</b>	
1. Of the total 2008 gross sales of ALL organic products (including any value-added or processed organic products), what percent was marketed through:		% of Total 2008 Gross Organic Sales	
		Percent	
Consumer direct sales	a. On-site (e.g., farm stand, U-pick) . . . . .	801	%
	b. Farmers' markets . . . . .	802	%
	c. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares . . . . .	803	%
	d. Mail order or Internet. . . . .	804	%
	e. Other consumer direct - <i>please specify:</i> <input type="text" value="825"/>	805	%
Direct-to-retail	f. Natural food stores (cooperatives and supermarkets). . . . .	806	%
	g. Conventional supermarkets. . . . .	807	%
	h. Restaurants or caterers. . . . .	808	%
	i. Institutions (e.g., hospitals, schools). . . . .	809	%
	j. Other direct-to-retail - <i>please specify:</i> <input type="text" value="830"/>	810	%
	Wholesale markets	k. Natural food store chain buyer. . . . .	811
l. Conventional supermarket chain buyer. . . . .		812	%
m. Processor, mill, or packer. . . . .		813	%
n. Distributor, wholesaler, broker, or repacker. . . . .		814	%
o. Sales to other farm operations . . . . .		815	%
p. Grower cooperative. . . . .		816	%
q. Other wholesale - <i>please specify:</i> <input type="text" value="835"/>		817	%
<b>TOTAL (sum of items 1a - 1q)</b>		<b>100%</b>	
2. Approximately what percent of this operation's organic products' first point of sales were sold:		Percent	
a. Locally (within 100 miles). . . . .	841		
b. Regionally (more than 100 miles but less than 500 miles). . . . .	842		
c. Nationally (500 miles or further). . . . .	843		
d. Internationally. . . . .	844		
		<b>100%</b>	