

Advisory Committee On Agriculture Statistics

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Annual Meeting, November 13-14, 2013



U.S. Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service

Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics (ACAS)

November 13-14, 2013

NASS National Operations Center

9700 Page Avenue, Suite 400

St. Louis, Missouri

Doubletree by Hilton Hotel – Westport

1973 Craigshire Road

St. Louis, Missouri

Members Present

J. Michael Baise

Rosalee K. Coleman

Jennifer Dennis, Ph.D.

Zachary Ducheneaux

Carole Engle, Ph. D.

John C. Foltz, Ph.D.

Douglas A. Huebsch, Committee Chair

Larry L. Janssen, Ph.D.

Roger S. Mix

Jean Opsomer, Ph.D.

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

Beth Carroll, Ph.D.

John D. Lawrence, Ph.D.

Ariane E. Lotti

Carl R. Matson

Emmett Redd, Ph.D.

Robert Yonkers, Ph.D.

Advisory Committee Officers

Hubert Hamer, Executive Director

Michelle Radice, Designated Federal Officer

United States Department of Agriculture

Catherine Woteki, Ph.D., Under Secretary of Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area
Stuart Bender, Esq., Director, USDA Office of Ethics

National Agricultural Statistics Service

Senior Executive Service Attendees:

Cynthia Clark, Ph.D., NASS Administrator
Joe Reilly, NASS Associate Administrator
Hubert Hamer, Chair, Agricultural Statistics Board

Kevin Barnes, Director, Western Field Offices
Norman Bennett, Director, Eastern Field Offices
Mark Harris, Director, Research and Development Division
Joe Parsons, Director, Information Technology Division
Renee Picanso, Director, Census and Survey Division
Joseph Prusacki, Director, Statistics Division
Barbara Rater, Acting Director, National Operations Division
Linda Young, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist

Speakers:

Troy Joshua, Chief, Environmental, Economics, and Demographics Branch
Jody McDaniel, Chief, Strategic Planning Office
Chris Messer, Chief, Census Planning Branch

Attendees:

Brad Parks
Chris Gottschall
Lisa DePeiza Jenkins
Jeff Stone

Scribes:

Lynn Raimist
Julie Shipley

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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 Wednesday, November 13, 2013, at 8:02 a.m. Present were 12 of the 20 ACAS members, two Committee ex-officio representatives, and all 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 state office, a regional office, a data calling center, and the hub for list maintenance and data collection. Mr. Hamer spoke to the Committee about the recent government shutdown, noting that for the first time in 150 years, NASS did not publish a monthly crop report. The report was delayed twice, but never cancelled. He also reported that more than 90 stakeholders attended the Data Users Meeting in Chicago, IL, on October 21, 2013. Mr. Hamer thanked the members who participated in the Advisory Committee teleconference on April 3, 2013. The teleconference was held in lieu of a meeting due to budgetary uncertainty.

Michelle Radice, Designated Federal Officer, reviewed the contents of attendees' packets, which included a copy of the 2012 Summary and Recommendations, an executive summary of the April 2013 teleconference, Confidentiality Certification form (ADM-004), a current list of ACAS members, and the NASS Partnering Handbook, a collaborative guide for community-based organizations and NASS staff to better work together for outreach activities. 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 based on “big picture” outlook. 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. 2012 Recommendations: Review and Update

Using a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Hamer reviewed the Advisory Committee’s recommendations from the February 2012 meeting and provided NASS’s response to each.

2012 Recommendations and Responses:

- No. 1. The Advisory Committee commends USDA for accepting or acting on last year’s recommendations and discussions.
 - *NASS thanked the Advisory Committee for each recommendation they carefully crafted for submission to the Secretary of Agriculture. NASS acted upon the recommendations as resources allowed, and provided the Committee a careful accounting of follow-up.*
- No. 2. The Advisory Committee recommends putting the 2011 recommendation no. 6 on the backburner for now and expanding the 2011 recommendation no. 7 in an attempt to increase participation by all minorities in NASS surveys, the Census of Agriculture, and all USDA programs. NASS should explore and pursue any new, innovative, and effective ways to reach these farmers, ranchers, and producers. Possible avenues to reach more small, beginning, and underserved farmers and ranchers includes outreach to community leaders, tribal governments, Department of Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, all land grant universities including tribal colleges, all USDA agencies, radio and television spots, community functions, Hispanic-serving institutions, and other minority entities throughout the United States.

- *The challenge remains for conducting outreach with hard-to-reach populations, but NASS will continue to work with all media outlets to contact hard-to-reach farming and ranching population. NASS conducted the third joint NASS and community-based organization (CBO) partnering workshop in early fiscal 2013. Representatives from close to 60 CBOs and nongovernmental organizations worked with NASS during list building, promotion, and data collection of the 2012 Census of Agriculture.*
- No. 3. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS perform a Land Tenure survey as early as possible but no later than 2015. This should be the highest priority “optional” follow-on.
 - *NASS is considering conducting a Land Tenure Survey and has included it in the “suite” of follow-on surveys to the 2012 Census of Agriculture. If appropriate funding is available, NASS will have this as a high priority because of the time it takes to prepare and conduct the survey. Prior to the suspension of the last land tenure survey, NASS had begun preparatory activities and identified some key modifications to the program. The timing of this particular survey is a key element to its success. A survey of land tenure arrangements comes at a significant cost and requires a tremendous amount of human capital. NASS will weigh these challenges along with other census follow-on requests when deciding the reference period for a special study.*
- No. 4. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS continue to support the Census of Aquaculture as the next follow-on survey to the Census of Agriculture to be conducted in 2014 for the reference year 2013 and to continue the catfish and trout reports.
 - *NASS agrees and was prepared to conduct the Census of Aquaculture in 2014 for the reference year 2013.*
- No. 5. The Advisory Committee commends NASS on its significant improvements in efficiency and the use of technology. We recognize that recent budgetary issues have posed significant challenges, but commend the agency for continuing to focus on productive change and encourage it to continue to focus on ways to maintain and improve morale in these tough times.
 - *NASS will continue to pursue efficient ways to fulfill its agency mission and to maintain as many programs and products as possible. NASS’s new field office structure equates to long-term savings that can be redirected toward the agricultural estimates programs. NASS is proposing this plan without any*

additional request for appropriations. This restructure standardizes data processing, improves the accuracy and reliability of estimates, and offers employees the chance for career advancement with fewer relocations.

- No. 6. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS add a new question to the Agricultural Resource Management Survey, “If you have planted cover crops this year, please indicate the number of acres by species.”
 - *After meeting with National Wildlife Federation (requestor of cover crop data), it was determined that the most complete instrument for obtaining this information is the Census of Agriculture. Both parties agreed to wait until after the 2012 Census of Agriculture results are published to determine whether more information will be needed. If so, ARMS will be considered as an option.*

- No. 7. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS discuss with the Department of Labor expanding the existing Farm Labor Survey to include a breakdown of all farm employees, both U. S. citizens and non-U. S. citizens, to better understand labor challenges in 2012 and beyond. The Committee recommends stressing confidentiality with regard to such questions.
 - *The current memorandum of understanding (MOU) between NASS and the Department of Labor is exclusively for the needs of the Department of Labor-Employment Training Administration (DOL-ETA). In late summer 2012, when discussions begin for the new MOU, NASS will ask the DOL-ETA to consider this request.*

- No. 8. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS include a brief statement on future censuses and surveys explaining the purpose of the Census of Agriculture and other surveys. It could be above the “Thank you for your cooperation” statement. Possible emphasis could be on the fact that these surveys determine payments to producers for crop and pasture insurance, equipment, disaster payments, and other county payments and practices.
 - *During the 2010 census content test, NASS researched various messages to determine whether a particular theme would elicit more responses. It was determined that the most effective message was that responding would prevent “continued follow-up contacts by phone or in person.” If the objective of the Advisory Committee’s recommendation is to increase response rates, research and experience have shown this approach not to be effective. Space is at a premium on the census questionnaire, which makes it hard to justify additional verbiage regarding potential benefits from*

reporting. NASS methodologists and Public Affairs staff will continue to develop survey-specific communication plans that include the purpose of the survey as well as attempts to answer “What’s in it for me?” questions.

- No. 9. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS develop an agritourism/local foods follow-on and set it as a priority among any optional follow-on surveys.
 - *As part of the “suite” of subsequent follow-ons to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, NASS will propose a data collection effort aimed at addressing the impact of regional food systems. Content was added to the 2012 Census that will provide NASS a complete population for which to conduct a special study. NASS will continue to reach out to others to capture data needs. The budget will ultimately determine the ability to fulfill the Advisory Committee’s recommendation. If the proposal for this new special study is adopted, NASS has the means to identify the subpopulation to include content related to local food systems and agritourism.*

- No. 10. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS merge the nursery and floriculture reports with the horticulture follow-on census if they face future elimination.
 - *NASS successfully integrated the annual 2009 Commercial Floriculture Survey and the tri-annual 2009 Nursery and Christmas Tree Production Survey with the 2009 Census of Horticultural Specialties. During the difficult budget times of FY 2011, NASS identified the consolidation of the Floriculture and Nursery program into the Census of Horticultural Specialties as a way to cut costs while maintaining the availability of data for this important industry. Additional planning would be required to facilitate the integration of these programs but the foundation for doing so has been laid.*

- No. 11. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS begin to investigate ways/methods to help “close the loop” with producers to help incentivize producers and give them reasons to provide data to NASS (such as providing producers with localized data, or other useful data) to maintain/improve response rates.
 - *NASS will evaluate the reports and products for the 2012 Census of Agriculture and determine whether new reports are warranted. Data providers and data users can always request a special tabulation of the agriculture census data or review the bibliography of historic requests to meet more unique data needs.*

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. 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, Dr. Cynthia Clark. 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 research initiatives:

- Long-term sustainable agriculture practices to meet future production demands
- Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education
- Open data initiative
- Nutrition challenges
- Global food insecurity challenges
- Climate change challenges

Dr. Woteki recognized that, in time of budget constraints, the agencies she oversees are working hard to address these challenges because there is no time to wait for better financial times. She lauded REE and the Department for unwearingly continuing to “Do More with Less” as cited in her May 15, 2013, letter to the editor in the New York Times. This includes finding the balance between remaining effective and keeping up Federal Statistical Agency standards and data integrity.

Dr. Woteki reminded members that the recent furlough did interrupt the survey and publication cycles at NASS, but recovery was smooth albeit challenging. She noted that the Presidential budget for fiscal year (FY) 2014 was higher than expected for the four-agency budget. The Department was operating on a continuing resolution – at the FY 2013 level but reduced by a rescission and sequester.

- **REE Initiatives**

- **USDA Scientific Integrity Policy.** Issued in May 2013, the document contains the following goals:
 - Promote a culture of scientific integrity through standard and credible processes and procedures.
 - Ensure the quality, accuracy, and transparency of scientific and technical information.
 - Ensure scientific communication free of political interference.
 - Ensure mechanisms are in place to resolve disputes.
- Implementation of the Scientific Integrity Policy includes a vigorous training program for all USDA employees who engage in, supervise, or manage scientific activities, who analyze and or publicly communicate information resulting from scientific activities, or who utilize the information in decision-making.
- The USDA Science Council, as Dr. Woteki noted, has members from all the relevant scientific agencies in USDA, and facilitates coordination and collaboration among USDA agencies. The Council ensures that science is integrated into policy and program decisions. The Council advances scientific discovery, technology breakthrough, and innovation required to achieve the Secretary’s science and technology priorities. Meetings are held quarterly to shape USDA science policy, program coordination, and assessment.
- **REE Action Plan.** As a follow up to the “Roadmap for REE Science” that was drafted in response to a 2008 Farm Bill provision, the REE Action Plan was published in February 2012. The plan reflects input from stakeholders, identifies mission- critical core areas to focus mission area efforts, and highlights opportunities and challenges ahead for American agriculture.
 - The REE Action Plan defines seven goals:
 - Local and Global Food Supply and Security

- Responding to Climate and Energy Needs
- Sustainable Use of Natural Resources
- Nutrition and Childhood Obesity
- Food Safety
- Education and Science Literacy
- Rural Prosperity/Rural-Urban Interdependence
- Dr. Woteki commented that NASS plays a key role in several aspects of the plan. The REE Action Plan is reviewed and updated to keep it current. Dr. Woteki asked that ACAS members receive the most recent draft of the document via email.
- **National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board (NAREEEAB).** The Board advises the Undersecretary and other USDA agencies on the conduct of science as well the practices and activities that are essential to an agency's credibility and integrity. The NAREEE Advisory Board meets twice a year and has several subcommittees.
 - Dr. Woteki highlighted the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) report that provided recommendations on the structure and makeup of the proposed Scientific Advisory Committee, including such matters as committee structure, member selection criteria, and member appointment constraints.
 - Dr. Woteki also discussed the NAREEE Advisory Board guidance on determining the focus of the proposed six new PCAST Innovation Institutes. The Board recommended the use of geographically dispersed listening sessions, targeted survey methods, and additional social media technologies to collect input from a wide variety of stakeholders.

Dr. Woteki highlighted some of the major accomplishments of NASS, such as the agency reorganization, the advancement of the computer assisted personal interviewing initiative, and creation of an effective working environment at the National Operations Center. Dr. Woteki cited ACAS as playing a key role in providing advice to overcome methodological challenges facing many statistical agencies. She also drew attention to statistical research and new data collection methodologies that NASS is currently pursuing.

Dr. Woteki addressed the tasks and issues Committee members would take up over the two days of the meeting, including:

- **Census of Agriculture.** Data collection plans, content, outreach efforts, and data products are all areas that require Committee members' input and ideas to make this most comprehensive undertaking inclusive, reflecting every facet of U.S. agriculture. The Census of Agriculture is important to the Department as it identifies small, new and

beginning, and minority and socially disadvantaged producers. Identifying and including these producers in the census helps further educate them on the many opportunities and programs the Department offers. Dr. Woteki asked members to study what worked in the 2012 Census of Agriculture in order to advise NASS on how best to approach the 2017 Census of Agriculture.

Dr. Woteki asked that ACAS members consider:

- formulating recommendation to help reach out to the populations of producers that are hard to reach, including minority producers, and small, new and beginning farmers and ranchers,
 - producing useful and effective data dissemination products,
 - designing a method to best prioritize census follow-ons,
 - working through budget implications when rescissions happen, and
 - institutional and operational implications and changes to programs and personnel at NASS.
- **Census Follow-on Surveys.** Dr. Woteki said she looks forward to the Committee's feedback that will help NASS prioritize census follow-on surveys.
 - **Program Changes.** Budget shifts have caused many discussions and decisions regarding changes to the NASS estimation program. Dr. Woteki reminded members that NASS maintains the reputation as the source of high-quality, unbiased data. The new USDA scientific integrity policy provides important guidance, but Committee members should also provide advice to NASS leaders on how to maintain that reputation considering all the external pressures. Dr. Woteki asked Committee members to discuss the updates on significant program changes and provide input and feedback on the following elements:
 - relevant criteria for making program changes and subsequently the best means of communicating program changes, and
 - emerging trends or issues that may impact the NASS program.

Dr. Woteki noted that Dr. Clark would review recent NASS budget movement and implications for NASS operations. REE and NASS realize that as technology and internal and external customers' needs change, the mission area must adapt as well.

Dr. Woteki ended her remarks by thanking the members for their time commitment and their advice to the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics. She noted that NASS is an inclusive, high-performing organization that, with members' help, looks forward to continuous improvement.

Discussion: Dr. Woteki fielded questions and comments regarding REE's preparedness for the critical need to transparently keep the mission area operational during sequesters, furloughs, and the government shutdown. ACAS members were very complimentary with Dr. Woteki and Dr. Clark's administration as well as the NASS staff that kept the agency running true during these turbulent budget times

Board members asked whether any efficiencies realized by a specific agency were directly returned to that agency. Dr. Woteki noted that agencies had a high level of autonomy and control over much of their budget and specific line items, so for the most part the efficiencies remain in the agency's purview. Dr. Woteki also referred members to the Secretary's Blueprint for Stronger Service, which looks at greater administrative efficiencies across the Department. As an example, Dr. Woteki noted procurement and contracting changes that realized a \$950 million savings across the Department.

4. State of NASS

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

Dr. Clark first talked about the NASS vision, which is to enhance service to agriculture. This entails ensuring the relevancy of agricultural data to all users, improving data quality and products, and realizing program cost efficiencies, all of which ultimately will position NASS as the statistical agency for all of USDA. Dr. Clark mentioned that NASS is the only statistical agency that has a federal and state cooperative data program. NASS provides consultation services to agencies and organizations on statistics and agricultural matters, including international entities that look at NASS as a world class agricultural organization.

Dr. Clark provided an update on the agency's current budget and the outlook for future budget planning. In fiscal years 2009 and 2010, NASS was able to reinstate the entire chemical use program and begin bioenergy and organic data collection initiatives. For FY 2011, the budget functioned under a continuing resolution and agricultural estimation programs and the census of agriculture were both funded below requested levels. There was an across the board budget cut in mid-FY 2011.

The 2012 fiscal year started with a continuing resolution and all agencies were expecting further budget cuts. NASS applied for and received an exemption to cover the cost of printing the census questionnaires. Much like FY 2012, FY 2013 also began under a continuing

resolution with expected rescissions later in the year. NASS again was fortunate and received an anomaly to use funds for census data collection.

To operate within this ever-changing budget environment, NASS was faced with determining how to reduce programs and remain relevant, NASS had options to: reduce current programs or reduce the quality of the data – the last of which was not an option consistent with the agency’s mission or vision. Management reviewed and prioritized programs, eliminating some, changing the periodicity of some, and reconfiguring others. In doing so, NASS considered the timing and frequency of surveys, as well as whether commodity estimates are mandatory or discretionary. The Senior Executive Service (SES) members took on the task of putting programs in priority order, and then funding as many programs as possible with the available budget.

Dr. Clark pointed out that during shrinking budget times the agency again was forced to make survival decisions. To become more efficient and produce cost efficiencies in programs and operations, NASS implemented new technology, standardized and centralized processes, re-engineered systems, established a central data collection and processing center, enhanced methodological foundations, and realigned functions throughout the agency. The agency continues to pursue additional initiatives to realize cost efficiencies.

Dr. Clark updated the Committee on the status of the transformational initiatives that she and the NASS Senior Executive Team developed to make the agency more efficient and effective. These include LAN (local area network) centralization; technology enhancements; computer-assisted personal interviewing; development of a Data Collection Center, Frames Maintenance and Training Center (now known as the National Operations Center or NOC); and video conferencing. Dr. Clark reported that the objectives of these efficiencies have largely been met. NASS realized cost savings by reducing training, manual data review, server purchases, and IT staff and by eliminating duplicate systems. The efficiencies have also had a positive impact on data quality as more standard processes reduce data variability and digitized data allow for real-time cost monitoring. Some initial investment was required and staff have been impacted in several ways. New jobs requiring new skills were created, and some positions shifted from headquarters to the NOC and field offices. Some support and IT staff positions were eliminated, and additional staff reductions occurred with buyouts to meet budget targets.

Dr. Clark discussed the NASS reorganization that was planned to offset staff and data collection costs that were rising faster than budgets. Opportunities to remain efficient in the current budget climate included increasing the specialization of individuals in field offices, which ultimately means reducing staff; and eliminating the need to maintain 46 separate field offices. Regionalizing these offices would be more cost-efficient. Centralizing NASS operations in fewer offices would reduce the number of staff moves by providing more career

experience and opportunities in one place such as a regional office. In the NASS reorganization, 46 field offices were consolidated into 12 regional field offices (RFOs), with supplemental staff in 34 state field offices (SFOs). The RFOs coordinate the front end data collection, analysis, and support of the NASS programs. There are approximately 25-35 staff positions in the RFOs. The SFOs are responsible for cultivating local relationships with cooperators and for providing direction and oversight to data collection staff in their state. In Headquarters, a new division was formed, the Methodology Division, effective as of October 2013. The Methodology Division is the operational partner to the Research and Development Division. It provides a centralized unit for mathematical statisticians, which allows for more cross training and focus on statistical programs within the operational program.

As NASS moves forward, the efficiencies will advance data quality through a formal quality control program that using centralized data collection and processing facilities and standardized, centralized processes to reduce data variability. NASS also now publishes measures of survey quality while model estimates improve data usability. The new infrastructure capabilities, better relationships with cooperators, and increased statistical knowledge from different levels of expertise all will position NASS well as the agency goes forward.

Dr. Clark thanked Committee members for their time and re-emphasized that she looks forward to working with the Advisory Committee to improve an already great agency.

Discussion: Dr. Clark fielded several questions and comments regarding NASS current and future budget scenarios. Committee members expressed concern about an actual or perceived relationship between reduced budgets and reduced response rates and the impact on data quality. Dr. Clark noted that NASS is pursuing several data collection options and strategies that could prove to be more cost effective and efficient. There was discussion of program changes driven by budget considerations. Members asked whether base funding would help solve the shortfall problems. Dr. Clark noted that base funding would be discussed by Joe Reilly, Associate Administrator, in a later presentation and tabled the question. Dr. Clark again thanked the Committee for its valuable input and advice that guided NASS through the program changes so far.

Regarding the agency's reorganization, Advisory Committee members expressed concerns that a reduction in force could be perceived as a reduction in data quality if there is only a presence director and one other staff member in each state; a decrease in staff size may be viewed as a decrease in data quality. NASS staff remarked that regionalization means more staff specialization for crop and livestock estimates. They also noted that under the proposed structure field office directors would spend more time doing outreach and field visits with stakeholders and customers since there would be fewer day-to-day office matters to manage.

NASS staff have included state department of agriculture leaders in discussions and addressed their concerns regarding the transition to a regional structure.

One discussion thread centered on the iPad data collection initiative and the security risk of having personally identifiable information in the field. NASS staff responded that the actual data do not reside on the iPad but in the virtual cloud, so there is not a security risk of leaking producers' confidential information. In the same vein, members wanted to know if reimbursable data collected by NASS is in the public sphere, to which the answer was that these data are available to the public.

Members were interested in whether the new methodology being developed and used at NASS was being shared among other statistical agencies. Dr. Clark explained that the statistical community fosters a cooperative environment and sharing is very encouraged.

One last question to Dr. Clark regarded how the budget process impacted funding for census follow-ons. Dr. Clark explained that though the Census of Agriculture process can be much more responsive to data needs because of the flexible timing, it is extremely sensitive in uncertain budget times because the follow-on surveys are often the only available "low hanging fruit" that can be cut as rescissions and sequesters are levied on agencies.

5. Status of Programs

Joseph Prusacki, Director of the Statistics Division, provided an overview of the NASS program changes in response to tighter budget constraints in order to identify cost savings and forward-thinking business efficiency opportunities. NASS management reviewed all reports and surveys, identified core versus non-core programs, looked at ways to modify the scope of the Census of Agriculture, and added the criterion recommended by the Committee to look at reducing a program's frequency rather than eliminating it.

The review team solicited input from headquarters and field office staff for potential program changes and the associated short- and long-term impact to the NASS budget, long-term data series, and data users.

Mr. Prusacki reviewed the recent situation. On October 17, 2011, NASS issued a public notice announcing that it would discontinue or reduce the following programs:

- Annual Reports on Farm Numbers, Land in Farms, and Livestock Operations – Eliminate
- Catfish and Trout Reports – Eliminate all
- Annual Floriculture Report – Eliminate

- January Sheep and Goat Report - Eliminate
- Chemical Use Reports – Reduce frequency of commodity coverage
- July Cattle Report – Eliminate
- Distiller Co-Products for Feed Survey – Cancel
- Annual Bee and Honey Report – Eliminate
- Annual Hops Production Report – Eliminate
- Monthly Potato Stocks Report – Reduce from monthly to quarterly
- Annual Mink Report – Eliminate
- Fruit and Vegetable In-season Forecasts and Estimates – Reduce from monthly and quarterly to annual report
- Nursery Report – Eliminate
- Rice Stocks June and September reports – Eliminate but continue January, March, and August reports

On November 15, 2011, Congress appropriated \$158.6 million for NASS in FY 2012 and directed NASS to reinstate as many reports as possible. On December 9, 2011, NASS issued a notice announcing reinstatement of the following programs:

- Annual Reports on Farm Numbers, Land in Farms, and Farm Income
- Catfish and Trout Reports (data collection begins Dec. 9; report released Dec. 20)
- Annual Floriculture Report
- January Sheep and Goat Report (data collection begins Dec. 23; report date is Jan. 27)
- July Cattle Report
- Annual Bee and Honey Report (data collection begins Jan. 23; report date is March 30)
- Annual Hops Production Report (data collection begins Dec. 9; report date is Dec. 21)
- Annual Mink Report
- Fruit and Vegetable In-season Forecasts and Estimates
- Rice Stocks June Report

On January 25, 2012, NASS announced the results of a review by NASS senior executives of its in-season fruit and vegetable reporting for the 2012 growing season. There would be no changes to end-of-season estimates for fruits and vegetables, but NASS would make the following changes to its in-season reporting:

- Vegetables – Reduce to one in-season report
- Apple – Forecast in October only (Eliminate preliminary summary and August report)
- Apricot – Forecast in July only (Eliminate June report)
- Cherry Production – Publish in June only (Eliminate forecast in June Crop Production)
- Grape – Forecast in August only (Eliminate July and October reports)
- Peach – Forecast in August only (Eliminate May, June and July reports)

- Pear – Forecast in August only (Eliminate June report)
- Pecan – Forecast in October only (Eliminate December report)
- Banana Revisions in May – Eliminate
- Guavas in May – Eliminate
- Olives in August – Eliminate
- Papaya Revisions in May – Eliminate
- Prune Forecast and Revisions in June – Eliminate
- Prunes and Plums Forecast in August – Eliminate

Apple industry representatives were not happy losing any production forecasts. They sent letters to the Secretary of Agriculture and held a meeting with REE Deputy Under Secretary Ann Bartuska. In March 2012, NASS announced that it would publish an in-season FY 2012 apple forecast as part of the August *Crop Production* report instead of October. Other apple estimates will be published as part of the *Noncitrus Fruit and Nuts Preliminary* (January) and *Final* (July) reports.

Fiscal year 2013 found all federal departments operating under a continuing resolution. In response to the reduced funding caused by a federal budgetary sequestration, NASS reviewed its survey programs against mission- and user-based criteria as well as the amount of time remaining in the fiscal year, with the goal of finding available cost savings and maintaining the strongest data in service to agriculture. On March 12, 2013, NASS announced the suspension of the following reports:

- All Catfish and Trout Reports including Catfish Feed Deliveries and Catfish Processing
- July Cattle Report
- Potato Stocks Reports
- All Non-Citrus Fruit, Nut, and Vegetable Forecasts and Estimates
- June Rice Stocks Report
- All Hops and Hops Stocks Estimates
- Annual Mink Report
- Milk Production Reports including Production, Disposition, and Income
- June on- and off-farm stocks for Austrian Winter Peas, Chick Peas, Dry Peas, and Lentils
- July Acreage Forecasts for Austrian Winter Peas, Chick Peas, Dry Peas, and Lentils

By April 2013, NASS announced that monthly milk production estimates would be provided through the end of the fiscal year, using only administrative data rather than incorporating data from the NASS production surveys.

In August 2013, NASS announced that in FY 2014, it would resume milk production quarterly producer surveys along with administrative data to establish monthly milk production estimates.

The government-wide furlough also affected publication dates of a number of agricultural estimates reports originally scheduled for release in October 2013. For the first time, a regularly scheduled crop production release did not go out as scheduled.

Discussion: Mr. Prusacki reminded Committee members that their input is critical since program reductions and program eliminations will always negatively affect some sector of the agriculture community. NASS programs are subject to budget fluctuations, and NASS is committed to preserving data series even at reduced frequency. Mr. Prusacki was asked about the budget implications creating a shortfall of data for specialty crops, and whether NASS had considered a proposal to allow institutions to assist in the data collection efforts. As there are budget implications no matter who collects the data, this discussion was tabled until Joe Reilly presented possible budget scenarios that NASS was researching.

Members also inquired as to whether the Census of Agriculture could cover some of the crops no longer surveyed because of budget limitations. NASS staff responded that all crops were collected on the census; however, those data are 18 months old by the time census results are released.

6. National Operations Center (NOC) Tour

ACAS members were given a walking tour of the newly outfitted National Operations Center by the Acting Director, Barbara Rater, and the Deputy Director, Brad Parks. The NOC is a centralized operations center for NASS that was designed with the assumption that efficiency and standardization are more easily achieved in a centralized structure. All data collected by mail, telephone, online, or personal enumeration are to be handled by the operations center. The design, construction, staffing, and operation of the National Operations Center are based on the premise of increased standards, more efficient use of resources, and reduced operating costs. Centralized calling and list frame operations, enhanced interviewer training and evaluation, and more closely monitored data collection reduce survey errors, improve data quality, and reduce survey costs. Data collection, list frame maintenance, and training conducted at fewer locations by highly trained staff ensuring standardized procedures reduce the source of error inherent to all activities and improve data quality. NASS is seizing this opportunity to continue to meet the expanded data needs for agriculture while both improving quality and reducing costs. Administration of these activities by fewer staff in a centralized design reduces operational cost by reducing staff resources necessary to complete the tasks.

7. Ethics Training for Advisory Committee Members

Stuart Bender, Director of USDA's Office of Ethics, gave a presentation to Committee members on ethics rules for federal advisory committee members. Members of the Advisory Committee on Agricultural Statistics fall into the category of "representative" (there are no regular government employees or special government employees on the Committee). Representatives are expected to reflect the views of the entity or interest category they were appointed to represent.

8. NASS Restructure and Five-Year Operating Plan

Jody McDaniel, Strategic Office Director, discussed the Administrator's transformational initiatives to ensure relevancy of agricultural data to all users; produce cost efficiencies in programs and operations, improve data quality and products; and better position NASS as the statistical agency for USDA. The agency developed a restructure and reorganization framework that would span the years 2009 through 2013. The transformation allowed survey processes to be centralized and created increased opportunities for staff development. The operational efficiencies discussed earlier provided cost savings while improving data quality, leading to greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Mr. McDaniel explained that NASS developed a five-year operating plan for 2014 and beyond. The plan presents a cohesive agency focus based on recommendations from NASS divisions. It establishes metrics and milestones to evaluate success with an annual review and revision process. The five-year operational plan focuses on:

- A revised training protocol. Includes reestablishing the Leadership Academy, utilizing technology enhancements to broaden delivery, and refocusing resources to allow for a blend of virtual and real-time training events.
- Redesigned workplace. A 12-month effort to develop a modern workplace, assuming increased participation in telework and work schedule flexibility to ensure better work/life balance.
- Enhanced research integration. Involves removing physical barriers to increase opportunities for collaboration with a focus on program improvements based on technology investments.
- Demonstrated relevance to American agriculture. Achieved through scientific collaboration with government and academic entities, active response to emerging data needs, and providing the data infrastructure for policy decisions.

Discussion: The Committee was interested in the retention standards for surveys and censuses. Members wanted to know if there was an impact or change as NASS office size and

locations changed. Mr. McDaniel assured members the federal standards of retention and disposition of surveys were strictly adhered to both before and after the reorganization.

In 2012, the ACAS had recommended that NASS “continue to focus on ways to maintain and improve morale in these tough times.” Questions were raised regarding the conduct of pre- and post-reorganization morale surveys. Mr. McDaniel referred members to OPM’s annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which measures morale, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. As staff development and training opportunities increase, the increased investment in staff will work to increase morale and staff retention. All employees were offered employment. About 10 percent of the workforce chose to retire or find employment elsewhere.

9. Budget Scenarios for the Agricultural Estimates and Census of Agriculture Programs

Joseph Reilly, NASS Associate Administrator, gave an overview of the agency budget process, discussing budgetary planning from requested funds to actual appropriations. Members were given a walk through of the eighteen-month preparation period. These preparations can be interrupted at any time due to continuing resolutions (CRs), recessions, and sequestration levies. The NASS budget resides in two aggregate appropriation line items: the Agricultural Estimates Program (AEP) and the Census of Agriculture Program (COAP).

All of government entered FY 2013 under a CR. For FY 2013, the census cycle required increased spending above standard operating levels to cover the cost of three census mailings, census printing, data collection and processing. NASS applied for and received an exception to spend above the CR limit to cover the cost of processing the 2012 Census of Agriculture. The FY 2013 budget that was finally passed at the end of March did not exempt NASS from two across-the-board rescissions, and an additional sequester was applied uniformly across all federal agencies. The total reduction for NASS was 7.28 percent, reducing the AEP funding mid-year. As a result, nine programs were suspended.

NASS prioritized all reports and surveys and reduced periodicity of some data rather than eliminate programs. NASS received several million dollars less for Census of Agriculture data collection and processing, which required eliminating data collection for four of the five outlying areas; eliminating two census special products, and reducing staffing, which in turn delayed processing and potentially may delay publication results.

As in FY 2013, Government again began FY 2014 operating under a CR, thus the FY 2014 budget is held at FY 2013 levels. In these uncertain fiscal times, NASS designed three budget scenarios assuming rescissions and sequestration reductions that might be deemed necessary

with the eventual passing of the FY 2014 budget. One budget scenario keeps all AEP and COAP spending static; therefore, all programs remain as they were in FY 2013. Another scenario reduces by 10 percent both the AEP and COAP FY 2014 President's Budget Request. Under this scenario, the budget reduction would eliminate all remaining fruit and vegetable reports as well as all chemical use reports. The COAP reduction targets census follow-on surveys and curtails 2017 Census initiatives. This scenario keeps intact the Current Industrial Reports program.

Other scenarios consider the costs of restoring suspended programs such as the Fruit and Vegetable Annual Reports, and the Chemical Use Program, which have faced reductions and suspensions in both periodicity and commodities covered. NASS costed out a variety of additional scenarios that would:

- Restore all AEP programs eliminated in FY 2012 and FY 2013 and restore the chemical use program to its original periodicity.
- Add surveys responding to emerging data needs (organic, local foods, and biomass energy) incrementally back into the COAP program as NASS receives increased funding levels.
- Support enhancement of the NASS Geospatial Program, which supplies information on climate change and greenhouse gas studies.
- Conduct a survey for land tenure, land ownership, and transition of agricultural land in cooperation with the Economic Research Service.

Mr. Reilly asked the Advisory Committee to consider the various possibilities and advise NASS on how to reduce programs and still remain relevant. Specifically, he asked members to review NASS reports and surveys to advise on program priorities and to consider changes in periodicity of some surveys rather than full elimination.

Discussion: Topics of discussion following Mr. Reilly's presentation included questions regarding the fate of the funding for the Census of Horticultural Specialties and the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey, both of which remain tentative. One member asked if any suspended AEP surveys could become reimbursable surveys. Mr. Reilly explained that some programs are mandated and cannot become reimbursable projects because doing so might raise questions of bias in the data if they survey is paid by special interest groups with non-federal funds. Members also talked about the increased use of administrative data.

Members introduced initiatives that extended the periodicity of the Census of Agriculture from five years to ten years. It was explained that a census is sent to the entire mailing list, and keeping that list up to date over the ten years from census to census would be a formidable task. Members also asked about the pushback from groups affected by surveys that were

suspended or cancelled. Some production groups have more resources than others and were more able to express their dissatisfaction. The Committee understood that if there is no funding to survey commodities that the public wants, then policymakers must be made aware of the interest in these data. Members also advised NASS to remember to stay unbiased and adhere to their strict confidentiality promises, consider soliciting states to fund portions of programs (e.g. Florida and the citrus program), consider levying a duty like the check-off program to help fund surveys at risk but doing so in a way that ensures that no bias is introduced, and finally to not pit one commodity against the other when prioritizing programs.

10. 2012 Census and Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) Updates

Renee Picanso, Director of the Census and Survey Division, discussed the 2012 Census of Agriculture survey process. NASS mailed 3.2 million forms in December 2012 and January 2013. Forms were received and processed at the Census Bureau's National Processing Center (NPC) in Louisville, KY. A Census Editing Unit was established at the National Operations Center to conduct manual editing of the report forms that were flagged for review. Currently, preliminary summaries have been run. NASS field and headquarters staffs are diligently reviewing millions of lines of county, state, and national level data, and the publication product designs are being finalized. There will be a preliminary data release followed by a full release later in the year.

Ms. Picanso also discussed the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS), which is a collaborative survey effort between NASS and the Economic Research Service. The ARMS is the data collection instrument for information on issues addressing agricultural resources, costs, and farm financial conditions. The ARMS provides the cost of production and farm income data for the Secretary of Agriculture's annual report to Congress on the state of agriculture's economy. ERS uses data from ARMS to develop annual forecasts of net farm income, farm sector value-added, and farm assets and debt.

In order to be more operationally efficient and reduce respondent burden, when ARMS and the census have the same reference years, NASS develops one form that will satisfy the data needs for both surveys. NASS has also streamlined the editing process, resulting in less statistician intervention and better data quality. Data collection costs were also lowered by increasing the usage of mail and online responses. In the past, ARMS was enumerated solely by personal interview.

Discussion: Ms. Picanso asked Committee members to encourage farmers and ranchers to complete census forms. She also asked for any assistance and ideas on improving response to the census and all NASS surveys. There was discussion of the costs of various modes of data collection relative to response rate. Mailing a questionnaire and having it mailed back is the

least expensive form of data collection, so NASS often conducts more than one mailing and telephone follow-up before resorting to personal data collection measures. NASS and ERS staff also fielded questions about landlords versus operators on an agricultural operation. Members were interested in how the crop rotation for ARMS was decided. ERS, with some input from NASS, devised the crop rotation that does not increase respondent burden but provides data in period increments that show trends. All these proposed rotations are subject to changes because of the current the fiscal climate.

A question was posed regarding the distribution of savings as more surveys were answered by the least expensive mode of mail and Internet. Would these monies saved be added to census follow on surveys? Dr. Clark explained that the fixed costs of conducting a census are huge, and most of these costs NASS bears as part of the operational budget. The costs are not directly billed to the census per se. Therefore monies saved in the data collection phase simply help offset the fixed costs. Some Board members also asked NASS to consider a new concept for the census - a restructure where in the interim years the focus could be on the major crops and in the reference year, smaller sectors of agriculture could be the focus of the census of agriculture. There was discussion as well regarding the \$1,000 threshold of sales that qualify operations as farms or ranches. NASS management explained that the impact of changing the farm definition from the \$1,000 threshold to \$10,000 would mean a drop in the number of farms from 2,200,000 to 800,000 farms. This is an unintended consequence that must be considered. In response to a question regarding adding subject matter questions to ARMS, both ERS and NASS personnel stated that suggestions can be made for the 2014 survey cycle.

11. Census of Agriculture – Survey Activities for Fiscal Years 2014 to 2019

Chris Messer, Chief of the Census Planning Branch, discussed the Census of Agriculture follow-on survey program, including aquaculture, farm water resource, horticulture, land tenure, and organic production follow-on surveys. Funding for census follow-on surveys is extremely sensitive to budget fluctuations, and the survey schedule often must be revised in response to budget pressure. Ms. Messer reiterated that the NASS budget has two budget lines – the Agricultural Estimates Program and the Census of Agriculture Program. The budget for the Census of Agriculture Program is worked in a five-year cycle and includes the every-five-year census as well as 1) ongoing activities that support the census proper and 2) follow-on surveys or special studies that provide greater detail on various topics. Some of the follow-ons survey have a long history, such as the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey, and some are newer surveys that address emerging issues such as on-farm energy.

As the agency's largest data collection program, the Census of Agriculture is a continuous effort that affords efficiencies in areas such as data collection thus producing cost savings to the agency while meeting the goal of continually providing quality statistics. Follow-on survey

populations are subsets of the main census population, and are determined by positive responses to criteria questions on the census report form. Examples in the 2012 Census included questions on agro-forestry, biomass information, local food networks, and energy.

Ms. Messer asked ACAS members to help NASS consider the implications of a change in funding approach to cover all aspects of the multi-year census program. An evened-out flat-line budget would cover the census itself as well as ongoing core census activities with base funding. It would additionally allow NASS to meet the data needs of NASS partners and stakeholders by prioritizing the timing of follow-on surveys that use information from the census reports to build the sampling frame.

Under the current budget, in 2014, NASS will conduct the newly acquired Current Agricultural Industrial Reports (CAIR) using base funding. The census follow-on surveys will be the Farm and Ranch Irrigation Survey and the Census of Aquaculture. With flat-line funding in 2015, NASS would use base funding to conduct CAIR and the Census of Horticultural Specialties. The Organic Production Survey, originally to be conducted using follow-on funding, has received tentative funding through another agency. Ms. Messer asked ACAS members to consider which survey to prioritize if funding for the organic survey is secured. Possible alternative follow-on surveys include Local Foods, Biomass Energy, and Land Ownership (Phase I).

Ms. Messer went on to note that this approach would provide base funding for core census program activities in the coming years, including CAIR (multiple years), the Census Content Test, the National Agricultural Classification Survey (NACS), the Area Coverage Evaluation Survey, and the 2017 Census of Agriculture. At the same time, it would allow NASS to schedule and conduct important follow-on surveys such as Energy Co-products, Land Ownership (Phase II), and the next cycle of survey follow-ons to the 2017 Census.

Discussion: After much discussion, the Advisory Committee decided that, with the current budget situation, it is difficult to advise NASS on follow-on survey scheduling. Members were concerned that there could be confusion with the definition of a certified organic producer versus one that self-identifies as organic. Members also noted that currently there are no USDA standards for organic aquaculture. These issues would be presented to senior management to raise with USDA officials.

There was considerable discussion on the former Agricultural Land Ownership Survey (AELOS), now the Land Ownership Survey. The last time AELOS was conducted was 1999, and ERS published a land-tenure and land-values release based on the data. Because the survey provides such a rich and unique data set, ERS requested that NASS consider conducting this survey earlier in the schedule than planned. ERS would work with NASS to seek funding

sources. Several members were in concurrence with this suggestion. A question was raised as to why AELOS could not just use the production data from the Farm Service Agency. Ms. Messer explained that the FSA database is not a one-to-one match with the NASS database of producers. FSA cannot provide the demographics or specific land status details. Statistically, there would be too much “noise” just by using the FSA names of landlords. Dr. Clark clarified questions about funding requests for follow-on surveys by explaining that NASS prepares a survey schedule and develops a funding request for a five-year period.

Members wanted more information about the Current Agricultural Industrial Reports. CAIR include fats and oils production, consumption, and stocks; fats and oilseed crushing; flour milling products; and consumption on the cotton system and stocks. There was concern that these surveys were more commercial and less related to the production of agriculture. Mr. Reilly said that the CAIR are actually considered censuses so their funding came from a different stream than the agricultural estimates program commodities. Ms. Messer added that under the Census of Agriculture authority, CAIR are mandatory surveys.

Committee members also wanted to verify that the Census Content Team was testing the census report form as well as polling respondents about how to get better response on the census. Ms. Messer reported that the Content Team is working to ensure comprehensible content and is using focus groups to discuss ways to improve response on the census.

12. 2017 Census of Agriculture and Beyond

Chris Messer focused her remarks about the 2017 Census on the content of the report forms, data collection priorities, and efficiencies. The 2012 Census of Agriculture is in the analysis phase with county-level review in progress. Even as NASS puts the final publication plans together for the 2012 Census of Agriculture releases, there is much work to do to prepare for the 2017 Census of Agriculture. This involves a thorough review of each step of the process from pre-data collection activities such as determining census content to post-data collection activities such as edit, imputation, and publication.

To improve response rate, and ultimately improve data quality in 2017, NASS will rigorously evaluate the content of the 24-page 2012 Census report form and will evaluate use of a generalized “long” report form, a “short” report form for a sample of the census mail list, and a form for American Indians designed to capture the specialized land arrangements. Ms. Messer asked Advisory Committee members to provide comments on a short form that NASS would use with a sample of the census mail list (criteria to be determined). NASS would impute the data for the removed sections based on the responses of those who receive the long form.

Ms. Messer reported that NASS will work to continue to improve the electronic data reporting

system and increase online response, but will also continue mail-out/mail-back procedures in 2017. In addition, NASS is evaluating various other measures for their ability to provide additional efficiencies in 2017. NASS, for example, is evaluating:

- Using information provided by respondents in the National Agricultural Classification Survey (NACS) as a way to reduce respondent burden. This was tested in the 2012 Census in a limited way, and that experience is being analyzed.
- Changes in internal edit and imputation procedures and data collection made to support data capture methodology. NASS wants to evaluate the 2012 changes to identify additional improvements.
- Using previously reported data, administrative data, and consideration of cost sharing with clients for more specific content (as Canada does in its agriculture census).

Discussion: Advisory Committee members discussed the fact that a shorter report form could affect the data available for county profiles. The Committee thought that running a pilot program using the short form for smaller operations, institutional farms, or small agricultural American Indian reservations would be a wise course of action to ensure there were no unintended consequences such as data gaps or lack of data in many cells causing multiple non-disclosure cases. The Committee was impressed with NASS's goals to maintain or better the 80 percent response rate, which is above the industry average response rate. Committee members reminded NASS that in some circumstances a computerized edit may not be equipped to compensate or impute for events such as drought, major fires, or flooding. The members were also very complimentary of NASS's vision to use administrative data for demographic data items like age, race, ethnicity, and gender, and for considering calculating and adjusting items such as years on farm or age based on the year the original data were collected. The Committee fully agreed that NASS should pursue electronic data collection because of its cost savings, citing electronic data collection as the most economical method, followed closely by the mail out/mail back process.

13. Embargo

Hubert Hamer, chair of the Agricultural Statistics Board, briefed ACAS members on revised census embargo procedures. NASS traditionally has released census data at a specified time and date with no external pre-release access except for very limited situations. In 2007, NASS permitted a briefing for the Secretary of Agriculture four hours in advance of the initial data release. The agency leadership also allowed field office state directors to brief National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) members an hour before the release. All embargoed pre-release briefings required signed confidentiality forms. This extremely 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. It is important to note that there is no market sensitive data included in the Census release.

During the 2007 Census of Agriculture release, it became apparent that there was little time to process the information to further describe and convey the data to the public in accurate, timely and useful ways. NASS is missing an opportunity to control and coordinate stronger, more intelligent announcements that provide better public understanding, meaning and access to census data by restricting pre-release departmental access to just a few hours. It also limits the ability of regional and local USDA officials (including NASS) to coordinate and participate in localized announcements.

NASS proposed the following embargo policy for 2012 Census release:

- Provide Department officials with embargoed census data three days in advance of data release. With a 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 USDA 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. 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.
- Provide NASDA 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.

There is no proposal to provide pre-release embargoed data access to news media.

Discussion: ACAS members realized that this is a good opportunity to promote agriculture. It gives USDA officials, especially the Secretary of Agriculture, time to craft a speech and become prepared to answer questions about the data indications. This is a good chance to be innovative and market the value of the census data. The data, when released, are already eighteen months old and not market sensitive.

Mr. Hamer asked Committee members to consider suggestions for who in academia should receive the data early in order to promote the importance of the data. Some members cautioned that legislators and administrators usually control the appropriations, so they encouraged

NASS to become more creative in marketing NASS through academic institutions. Universities and colleges with large stakeholders should receive the data early to develop public relations messages and presentations for their stakeholders. Another suggestion was for NASS to prepare “teaser” releases to send out between the preliminary data release and the full data release.

14. NASS Field Operations

Kevin Barnes, Western Field Operations Director, and Norman Bennett, Eastern Field Office Director, discussed the role of Field Operations, which includes providing and maintaining a local presence with the state departments of agriculture, supporting the NASS statistical program, and managing the data collection operations in the state and regional offices. As of September 2013, all staff were placed in one of the twelve newly organized regional offices or a state offices. The work processes were realigned to the regional structure, and state offices were downsizing.

The reorganization has created challenges such as standardizing operational procedures and processes, training and development of employees, maximizing the utilization of iPads for field data collection, and finalizing staff levels within the current budget constraints. The Field Office Directors discussed that the regional structure has caused both an operational and cultural paradigm shift for employees over the last two years, but said staff are trying to settle in and learn and work under the new procedures.

Discussion: Mr. Barnes asked members to indicate if they knew and/or worked with the NASS state or regional directors in their states. A good many members raised their hands. Mr. Hamer said the list of ACAS members would be circulated to each of the directors, who would be instructed to make contact with any ACAS member in their state. There were some members that needed clarification as to the relationship between NASDA and NASS. Mr. Bennett explained that the state agricultural leaders were collaborators and supporters of NASS prior to the reorganization and were consulted throughout the entire reorganization process. NASDA is also the contracting organization that oversees the enumerators used by NASS.

15. Public Comment Period

There were no individuals who wished to make public comment during the scheduled time. There were no comments submitted electronically.

16. Election of Advisory Committee Chairperson

Mr. Doug Huebsch expressed interest in continuing to serve as the Committee Chairperson and

was unopposed in that capacity. Since he ran unopposed, a vote was conducted by a show of hands. Mr. Huebsch was reelected unanimously by his fellow Committee members. Mr. Huebsch accepted the position as the reelected Chairperson of the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics.

17. Committee Requested Topics and Recommendations

Mr. Huebsch asked for input, views, and general observations from each Committee member. In summary, there were expressions of appreciation for the meeting, the extensive information conveyed, and the opportunity to have a face-to-face meeting in the new NASS National Operations Center during these uncertain budget times. Committee members discussed the possibility of scheduling conference calls between annual meetings to engage with NASS more often and better deal with the volume of business at hand. They praised NASS's handling of the meeting as well as the many organizational changes it is making. They also commended the Department for supporting the organizational changes and operational efficiencies NASS is pursuing. Some commented on the continuing challenge of getting producers to participate in surveys and the census and finding ways to close the loop, improve response rates, and get value back to participants.

Members praised Dr. Clark for her leadership and foresight in modernizing and streamlining the agency. Ex officio members offered the advice that NASS should remain transparent about the creation and staffing of the regional offices to prevent low employee morale, and that NASS should continually work on participant response issues. Suggestion was made to repackage survey results in ways organizations can use for their constituents.

Following this open-ended discussion, the Committee took up its discussion of recommendations (detailed below).

18. Closing Remarks

After the Committee discussed and passed its recommendations, Mr. Hamer announced that the next meeting is tentatively scheduled for November 2014, and that it would most likely be held in Washington, D.C. Mr. Huebsch, as Committee Chairperson, called the meeting officially adjourned at 12:30 p.m. on Thursday, November 14, 2013.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE STATISTICS
NOVEMBER 2013 RECOMMENDATIONS

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 follow the Five-Year Operational Plan, which allows the agency the opportunity to focus its efforts, above maintaining the current operational programs, toward 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 staffed 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 a reorganized agency that will benefit from centralized processing at the National Operations Division, enhanced integration of research into the business process through the new 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 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: After the Secretary of Agriculture accepts NASS' recommendations, 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 NASS receive "base funding" that 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 conduct four out of six follow-on surveys scheduled in the original plan of the four year flat-line census of agriculture. The Biomass survey was eliminated and the Land Tenure survey-Phase I will be conducted through a reimbursable agreement with the 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 be included in the base funding for fiscal year 2014.

Background: Responses to the census of agriculture provide NASS an opportunity to identify subpopulations for follow-up surveys that 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 FY 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 2014 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 activities 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 Agricultural Industrial 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 officials with embargoed census data up to three 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 that 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 to determine criteria for ranking surveys in order of priority when budget or other external factors cause deviation from the established survey calendar. They should consider, for example, importance of the survey, data users' need for information, continuity factors, periodicity, other potential funding sources, its role in the NASS program, and other factors as relevant. .

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 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/ownership 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, which will significantly reduce 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.



ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE STATISTICS



Doubletree by Hilton Hotel - Westport
1973 Craigshire Road
St. Louis, MO 63146

NASS National Operations Center
9700 Page Avenue, Suite 400
St. Louis, MO 63132

WEDNESDAY, November 13, 2013

NASS National Operations Center Conference Room		
Time	Topic/Activity	Discussion Leader
7:30 am C S T	Meet in Doubletree Hotel Lobby and Board Bus for the NASS National; Operations Center (NOC). Bus will depart no later than 7:45 a.m.	
8:30 am	Call to Order and Welcome	Doug Huebsch, Advisory Committee Chairperson
8:35 am	Introductions	Hubert Hamer, Chairperson, Agricultural Statistics Board
8:50 am	Meeting Overview and ACAS Committee Overview	Hubert Hamer and Michelle Radice, DFO
9:05 am	2012 Recommendations Review and Report, Discussion	Hubert Hamer
9:25 am	Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area Remarks	Dr. Catherine Woteki, Under Secretary, Research, Education, and Economics
9:45 am	'State of NASS' Address	Dr. Cynthia Clark, NASS Administrator
10:15 am	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
10:30 am	Break	
10:45 am	Status of Programs	Joe Prusacki, Statistics Division Director
11:15 am	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
11:30 am	National Operations Center (NOC) Tour	Barbara Rater, NOC Acting Director
12:15 pm	Working Lunch - Ethics Training for Advisory Committee Members	Stuart Bender, Director, USDA Office of Ethics
1:15 pm	NASS Restructure and 5-Year Operating Plan	Jody McDaniel, Director, Strategic Planning Office
1:45 pm	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
2:00 pm	NASS Budget Discussion Regarding Agricultural Estimates and Census of Agriculture Programs	Joe Reilly, NASS Associate Administrator
2:30 pm	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
2:45 pm	2012 Census of Agriculture and Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) Update	Renee Picanso, Director of Census and Survey Division
3:15 pm	Discussion	Doug Huebsch

WEDNESDAY, November 13, 2013 (continued)

T i m e	Topic/Activity	Discussion Leader
3:30 pm	Break	
3:45 pm	Census Follow-On Survey Schedule	Chris Messer, Chief, Census Planning Branch
4:15 pm	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
4:45 pm	2017 Census of Agriculture	Chris Messer and Troy Joshua, Chief, Environmental, Economics, and Demographics Branch
5:05 pm	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
5:25 pm	Wrap Up	Hubert Hamer
5:30 pm	Adjourn and Board Shuttles to Return to Hotel	

THURSDAY, November 14, 2013

Doubletree by Hilton Hotel – Westport: Boardroom A and B		
T i m e	Topic/Activity	Discussion Leader
8:00 am C S T	Recap and Review of Previous Day	Hubert Hamer
8:15 am	Discussion Regarding Embargo Time of 2012 Census of Agriculture and The Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (C-FARE) Report Review	Hubert Hamer
8:45 am	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
9:00 am	NASS Field Operations Update	Kevin Barnes, Director, Western Field Operations Norman Bennett, Director, Eastern Field Operations
9:15 am	Discussion	Doug Huebsch
9:30 am	Travel Reimbursement Form 101	Michelle Radice, ACAS Designated Federal Officer
9:45 am	Public Comments	Doug Huebsch and Hubert Hamer
10:15 am	Break	
10:30 am	Committee Requested Topics and Recommendations	Doug Huebsch and Hubert Hamer
10:45 am	Discussion and Drafting of Recommendations	Committee
11:45 am	Presentation of Recommendations	Committee
12:15 pm	Wrap Up	Hubert Hamer
12:30 pm	Adjourn Meeting	