

Advisory Committee on Agricultural Statistics
Recommendations and Other Issues
2/25-26/2008

1. The Advisory Committee supports the Enterprise Data Center waiver request, exempting USDA statistical agencies from the Department's Data Center Consolidation initiative. NASS should continue to maintain control of the applications and hardware containing "market-sensitive information" and therefore be exempt from the Department's Data Center Consolidation initiative. According to the document, Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency (2005), a widely acknowledged position of independence is necessary for a statistical agency, like NASS, to have credibility and to carry out its function to provide an unbiased flow of useful, high quality information. Without the credibility that comes from a strong degree of independence, data users may lose trust in the accuracy and objectivity of the Agency's data, and data providers may become less willing to cooperate with Agency requests.
2. The Advisory Committee recommends that NASS create a user forum Web site, as soon as it is feasible, that centers on its major products. This would provide customers and producers a way of creating dialogue on NASS programs and products.
3. The Advisory Committee recommends that USDA determine a way to find funds to reinstate the Chemical Use Program by no later than 2009.
4. The Advisory Committee would like for NASS to continue providing access to ARMS data through National Opinion Research Center (NORC) data enclave. New participants will be accepted under the existing security, training, and project approval procedures with the addition of meeting with NASS State Directors to initiate project planning. Progress will be reported at the 2009 Advisory Board meeting.
5. The Advisory Committee recommends supporting the 2007 Census follow-on programs as presented.
6. The Advisory Committee would like to reverse their recommendation concerning releasing records to the National Archive and Record Administration (NARA) beginning with the 2012 Census, after the change to Title 7 is made. The Advisory Committee would like to recommend that NASS not release Census of Agriculture data to NARA. NASS promotes confidentiality, and the Advisory Committee feels that NASS should stand behind their word. The Committee also feels that response rates will be affected if the producers find out that their data will be released in 75 years starting with the 2012 Census.

Public Comments from the Advisory Committee on Agricultural Statistics Meeting

Dr. Marco A. Palma–Texas Cooperative Extension

USDA-NASS survey programs on nursery and greenhouse crops are critically important for industry managers, allied professionals and University-based researchers.

More frequent reporting is needed for specific horticultural crops, now provided only every 10 years in the Census of Horticultural Specialties.

Some important ornamental plant commodities, such as turfgrass sod, are not covered by annual surveys and are only minimally covered in the Census of Agriculture with information on production area.

Dr. Jennifer H. Dennis–Purdue University

The nursery and floricultural industries are not fairly represented on the NASS Advisory Council. The current Council membership is heavily weighed and biased toward traditional commodity and program crops and livestock producers. Only 1 representative out of the 25 members–The Society of American Florists (SAF) represents the floriculture sector. We do not feel that this representation necessarily provides a comprehensive view of all nursery and greenhouse crops. We encourage the addition of representatives from the nursery crop producer community to provide broader representation and input from these agricultural crop producers.

Rebeckah F. Adcock–American Farm Bureau Federation Leonard Gianessi–Crop Life Foundation

We did mention in our report that support for the current program was “soft.” USDA has misinterpreted what we meant by that statement. We meant that the current surveys are taken for granted. Users are not demanding more and have been quietly going about their business of using the NASS surveys for the past 17 years. No one is jumping up and down calling attention to the program.

Let me remind USDA that the NASS Agchem Survey Program is the only source of publicly available pesticide use survey for the Nation. Only one State, California, has a set of full use reports. The NASS program provides some usage data for 25-30 States; but more importantly, the NASS surveys cover 80-90 percent of the acreage in the US for the crops in the survey. The NASS data are authoritative for all of the major crops grown in the U.S.

In my letter to the Undersecretary, I pointed out the real danger in eliminating the NASS Agchem Survey Program by reminding him of the reason it was started in the first place. In the late 1980s, there were a series of public scares regarding the safety of pesticides which were fueled by the lack of pesticide use data. The National Academy of Sciences released a report on pesticides in the diet. In their calculations, they assumed that all pesticides are used on 100 percent of the acres of crops with registered uses. This assumption grossly overestimated risks; however, the NASS stated that there were no actual usage data to refine these assumptions.

Without the NASS data, there are only proprietary sources of data of uncertain accuracy and completeness which cannot be released publicly. Thus, there would be no more transparency for regulation and no chance for the agricultural community to review the assessments for accuracy. EPA may have to resort to simply assuming that 100 percent of the crops are treated with all registered pesticides which would greatly overestimate risks and jeopardize the continued registration of pesticides important to U.S. growers.