

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE STATISTICS
2012 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation No. 1. The Advisory Committee commends USDA for accepting or acting on last year's recommendations and discussions.

Background: At the 2011 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 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.

Background: Of the recommendations the Advisory Committee considered at its 2011 meeting, no. 6 was that NASS conduct a follow-on census that "focuses solely on the unique sovereignty and cultural aspects faced by American Indian and Alaska Native farm and ranch operators on reservations, villages, corporations, pueblos, and nations across the United States." Recommendation no. 7 from 2011 was that NASS "expand its outreach and education efforts to reach all operators, regardless of size or location" to better count small, new, and minority-operated farms and ranches. Recommendation no. 7 passed in 2011, but no. 6 was tabled and referred to a subcommittee to develop the concept further. This subcommittee met and attempted to develop goals, objectives, and a timeline. The subcommittee also identified physical and cultural barriers to reaching the population of interest.

NASS Response: NASS will continue to work with all media outlets to contact hard-to-reach farming and ranching population. NASS plans to conduct the third joint NASS and community-based organization (CBO) partnering workshop in early fiscal 2013.

Representatives from close to 60 CBOs and nongovernmental organizations will work with NASS to develop plans for list building and promotion of the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Recommendation 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.

Background: The Advisory Committee further suggested that NASS consider a follow-on in 2014 that incorporates land tenure, land use, and farm transition plans in 2014.

NASS Response: 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.

Recommendation 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.

Background: The Census of Aquaculture was scheduled to be conducted in 2011 for the reference year 2010. The previous Census of Aquaculture was conducted in 2005 and contains data that are now seven years out of date. These data support government payments and programs in USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Agricultural Research Service, Foreign Agricultural Service (Trade Adjustment Assistance), and Risk Management Agency; as well as in the Joint Subcommittee on Aquaculture, the National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan, , the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and others.

NASS Response: NASS will put forward the Census of Aquaculture as a planned follow-on in the FY 2014 agency request for budget appropriations. NASS is currently in the preliminary planning phases of conducting a Census of Aquaculture with a tentative mail-out scheduled for December 2013. The budget will ultimately guide the decision to conduct this follow-on. Key administrative and analytical staff has been committed, with list building and organizing documentation for Office of Management and Budget approval already under way.

Recommendation 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.

Background: NASS has faced significant budget challenges in recent years. In particular, the Agricultural Estimates Program has experienced reduced funding, forcing NASS to make some difficult choices. NASS has embarked on a number of efficiencies that have saved money and prevented further program cuts and eliminations. NASS has centralized its computer servers, which has streamlined hardware and software maintenance and access. NASS has installed video teleconferencing equipment in every field office and in multiple locations in headquarters, reducing the need for national workshops and travel. NASS has embarked on a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) initiative that will significantly reduce the cost of printing and mailing questionnaires. In 2010, a National Operations Center (NOC) was opened in St. Louis, Missouri to centralize data collection and frames maintenance and to standardize survey processing. Research initiatives are also underway to improve quality checks of reported data and to streamline estimation processes.

NASS Response: NASS will continue to pursue efficient ways to fulfill its agency mission and to maintain as many programs and products as possible. NASS currently has a proposal to regionalize its field office structure. This proposal will equate to long-term savings, increasing the chance of maintaining important farm programs. NASS is proposing this plan without any additional request for appropriations. If approved, the proposal will standardize data processing, improve the accuracy and reliability of estimates, and offer employees the chance for career advancement with fewer relocations.

Recommendation 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.”

Species of Cover Crop	Acres Planted

Background: Cover crops provide significant benefit for agriculture and the environment; they build soil, provide extra forage, remove carbon dioxide, reduce flooding by storing

water, and reduce fertilizer runoff, among other benefits. They have been used for centuries by many societies, and U.S. farmers are rediscovering a wide variety of such crops, but there are no available comprehensive data about who plants cover crops, what species they plant, or how many acres they plant. The 2012 Census of Agriculture has a question about cover crops, but more information may be needed.

NASS Response: After meeting with National Wildlife Federation (requestor of cover crop data), it was determined that the best 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.

Recommendation 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.

Background: There is interest in knowing more about who actually works on farms than the Farm Labor Survey currently provides with respect to immigrant and seasonal labor. Yet it is difficult to ask this kind of question or to repeat the confidentiality pledge on a particular question since all answers to all questions are equally and fully confidential. To find a way to get more such information while working within important privacy and confidentiality principles, the Committee recommended NASS initiate a discussion with the Department of Labor.

NASS Response: 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.

Recommendation 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.

Background: Achieving adequate responses to surveys and the census is always a primary objective for NASS. Declining response rates has lead to increased research regarding messaging in correspondence letters and marketing materials. An influential factor may be

providing the respondent a clear understanding of the purpose of the survey or census of agriculture. Among the messages that have been explored is itemizing uses for the data collected. NASS has chosen to supply specific uses to targeted audiences and to be comprehensive in larger documents such as the NASS-CBO Partnership Handbook, which gives more specific uses of the data collected.

NASS Response: 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.

Recommendation 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.

Background: As a means to remain relevant and respond to emerging trends in agriculture, NASS utilizes the Census of Agriculture to identify subpopulations for potential special studies or follow-on surveys. NASS has reached out to many groups, including the Advisory Committee, for stakeholder feedback regarding which follow-on surveys may provide the most benefit to the agricultural community. Agritourism has come up before as a means for farms, especially small farms, to remain sustainable. Agritourism can be linked to local foods since communities of small farms can work together to support one another through their “specialty” or niche consumer. Information on agritourism would help determine some of the social and economic characteristics of local foods and information on local foods would help determine geographical, social, and economic divides.

NASS Response: 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 staff has participated actively in Deputy Secretary Merrigan’s “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative. Meeting with this group has shed light on the need for more data for informed policy decisions. NASS will continue to reach out to this group and 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 agritourism.

Recommendation 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.

Background: The public sector currently is dealing with shrinking federal budgets. The elimination of a data series is a serious but often necessary consideration when faced with severe budget constraints. Based on the need to preserve the major economic indicators, NASS must regrettably consider additional programs to reduce or eliminate to make up for a budget shortfall. NASS has been creative about looking for opportunities to combine data collection activities but remains cognizant of increased respondent burden. Proper determination of the survey content is necessary to reduce the average time needed to collect information as well as insure that the survey instrument has been properly tested.

NASS Response: 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 Horticulture 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.

Recommendation 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.

Background: In the face of declining producer response rates, it is important to look at all aspects of the survey process to find ways to give producers motivation to participate in new surveys. This includes providing them with information and data from earlier surveys showing how the questions relate to their interests. It also includes giving them information about the survey findings when they are released and making the connection that NASS has this valuable data because of their input and others like them.

NASS Response re: Census: For the 2007 Census of Agriculture, NASS generated new reports to address special requests such as the Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Profiles, the topic-specific Fact Sheets, and the following custom products:

- **Years on Present Farm of Principal Operator: 2007**
- **Data Comparison: Major Crops**
- Operators by Demographic Groupings
- Median Farm Size: 2007 and 2002

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 census of agriculture data or review the bibliography of historic requests to meet more unique data needs.

NASS Response re: Surveys: Survey administration teams review the report(s) produced from all surveys and evaluate new reports or tables in the reports.

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.