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Fact Sheet

Tracking a Changing US Agriculture

Suggestions for Enhancing and Improving the Census of Agriculture

Recommendations from the Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (C-FARE) panel of independent experts to strengthen the U.S. Census of Agriculture will help the Census keep pace with the changes in the nation's farms and ranches.

Key Findings

- Major changes in U.S. agriculture—such as economic globalization and rapidly evolving information technology—demand ongoing evaluation of the purposes, content and processes of the Census.
- Tight federal budgets and resulting staffing constraints will necessitate creative approaches in managing the Census to assure timely availability of comprehensive data.
- Census planning and implementation must be an increasingly integrated process, beginning with designing the output in response to user needs for data and then working backwards to prioritize questionnaire content and procedures to produce that output.
- The Census and other surveys NASS conducts should be viewed as one system for planning purposes, with clear criteria for determining the data to be collected by each survey.
- Transparency of all aspects of the Census will be increasingly expected by data users, but should generate increased participation by the targeted population and results that are easier to interpret.
- Many of the challenges that must be addressed if the Census is to remain a reliable source of information about American agriculture require a major additional investment to enhance the research capacity of NASS, a capacity now severely taxed to meet current operational needs of NASS for the Census and all of its other statistical programs.
- Successful implementation of recommendations will require partnerships with other agencies, organizations and entities to identify farm operators, enhance data processing techniques, and more effectively utilize information technology.

Selected Recommendations

The report lists 24 recommendations pertaining to everything from whom to survey and what to ask to how to improve the accuracy and usefulness of the results. Some specific recommendations are:

- **Create a panel of agricultural experts to evaluate implications for the Census of the rapidly changing and restructuring global agri-food system.** Growing complexity in agriculture creates myriad challenges for the Census. Therefore, NASS should assemble experts from academia, government and the private sector to more fully examine these structural changes and their implications.
- **Expand the use of information technology throughout the Census process—from online survey response to data processing and user-friendly data products.** Developing user-friendly web questionnaires, state-of-the-art and efficient processing and a new generation of user-friendly data products is expected to not only improve the efficiency and accuracy of the Census, but also save time for respondents and users.
- **Increase transparency in all aspects of the Census and make that transparency replicable and user friendly.** Data users need information on all aspects of data collection operations, processing, coding, weighting, imputations and other characteristics of the data to assess their usefulness, appropriateness and interpretation. With NASS's already strong commitment to transparency, expanded use of information technology will allow it to be accomplished more efficiently.
- **Incorporate product design into the Census planning process.** A well-defined package of data products can improve efficiency in data processing. Likewise, data products can be designed to improve participation in the Census.
- **Invest in additional research capacity to redesign survey instruments and products, adopt new methods for statistical analysis, manage the potential of new information technology and increase data transparency.** Census research staff, while highly qualified, is limited in number and stretched thin. Expanded research capabilities are urgently needed to answer the difficult questions about doing the right things and doing things right for the 2012 Census.
- **Balance all Census activities to assure the most effective and efficient use of resources. This includes weighing the marginal costs of identifying and surveying additional farms versus improving other aspects of the Census.** The review highlighted several situations where trade-offs need to be assessed and priorities established to assure the most effective use of available resources.
- **Undertake a comprehensive re-conceptualization of data products and services that anticipates information-technology capabilities and interests of data users by 2012.** Meeting the requirements of computer-literate users justifies a focus on Internet products and services that allows users to easily find data and to configure those data to meet specific needs.

The review panel recommended more partnering by NASS with other public and private organizations to improve participation by farmers in the Census and especially to increase Census coverage of minority and women-operated farms and other farm types that currently have low coverage levels. Several recommendations address specific statistical procedures in data processing to improve area-frame sampling, non-response adjustments, data editing and item-level imputation.