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Tracking a Changing US Agriculture

Review Emphasizes Improving and Enhancing the Census of Agriculture

WASHINGTON, Mar. 12, 2007 -- A report released today by the Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (C-FARE) provides recommendations for strengthening the U.S. Census of Agriculture (Census) to keep pace with the changes in the nation's farms and ranches. This review focuses on planning for the 2012 Census, even as the 2007 Census questionnaires are being readied for distribution.

Prepared at the request of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), which conducts the Census every five years, the report addresses two overarching questions: (1) Is NASS doing things right? (2) Is NASS doing the right things?

The recommendations for strengthening the Census were the result of a comprehensive review of the changes in U.S. agriculture and current Census procedures by a panel of experts convened by C-FARE, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC, dedicated to enhancing the application of economics to food, agricultural and resource issues.

"American agriculture is changing rapidly. Consequently, the Census of Agriculture, which is an absolutely critical source of information to public and private decision makers alike, must constantly evolve to keep up," said Dr. John E. Lee, Review Director and former Administrator of USDA's Economic Research Service.

"The C-FARE review panel was impressed with the commitment that NASS is making to learn as much as possible from the 2007 Census to improve the 2012 Census," said Dr. A. Gene Nelson, who chaired the panel and is Executive Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.

The report lists 24 recommendations pertaining to everything from whom to survey and what to ask to improving accuracy and usefulness of the results. The review panel recommended more partnering by NASS with other public and private organizations to improve participation by farmers in the Census, especially minority and women operators.

The use of computer technology is encouraged to facilitate data collection, processing and reporting. Several recommendations address specific statistical procedures in data processing to improve area-frame sampling, non-response adjustments, data editing, and item-level imputation. Cross-cutting recommendations relate to identifying data needs and designing the content of the questionnaire. Expanding the Agency's commitment to transparency will encourage higher response rates and data use.

Copies of the report, *Improving Information about America's Farms and Ranches: A Review of the Census of Agriculture*, are available from NASS (contact Ray Garibay, 202 720-7017) or C-FARE (contact Tamara Wagester, 202 408-8522). The report may also be viewed and downloaded from the C-FARE website (www.cfare.org) or the NASS website (www.nass.usda.gov).

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