

MULTI-CULTURAL OUTREACH TO ETHNIC FARMERS FOR THE 2007 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

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Abstract: The National Agricultural Statistics Service is responsible for conducting the Census of Agriculture every five years within the United States. There are approximately two million farms in the U.S., with an increasing percentage operated by individuals belonging to a minority or ethnic group. For example, between 1997 and 2002 there was a 51% increase in the number of principal farm operators of Hispanic heritage. There are enclaves of immigrant farmers appearing throughout the U.S. growing specialty fruits and vegetables. These enclaves are often begun by individuals who work as farm laborers on larger operations, save enough money to start a small operation, and encourage family members to join them. These individuals are usually very suspicious of any government inquiry, including the Census of Agriculture. Farmers and ranchers living on American Indian reservations have been severely undercounted because of lack of access within those reservations. Language and lack of trust have become major barriers to the traditional mail-out / mail-back survey design for the Census of Agriculture. This paper discusses the plan and implementation of a multi-cultural outreach to small, ethnic farmers and ranchers on the 2007 Census of Agriculture.

Introduction

The census of agriculture is taken every five years in the United States (U.S.) to obtain statistical information on agricultural land, production and the producers for each county or county equivalent, state, and the Nation. The first agriculture census was taken in 1840 as part of the sixth decennial census of population, and continued to be part of the decennial census through 1950. The census of agriculture is the only source of uniform comprehensive agricultural data for every state and county or county equivalent in the U.S.

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Background

The responsibility of conducting the census of agriculture has rested historically with the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In 1997, that responsibility was transferred to the National Agricultural Statistics Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Agriculture census data are routinely used by: Congress; Federal, State, and local government organizations; the business community; scientific and educational institutions; and farm organizations. The private sector, including businesses, farm cooperatives, commodity and trade associations, and utility companies rely on agriculture census data to develop plans for locating new plants, service outlets, and sales and distribution facilities. Administrative and legislative bodies at all levels of government use census data in planning and analyzing farm and rural programs. Local government employs census statistics for land planning and zoning, to aid in evaluating environmental policy, and economic planning. Federal government agencies use production, sales, size, and type of farm data from the census to calculate economic measures such as farm income estimates, indexes of productivity and price levels. Also, census data are used to calculate Federal disaster compensation, environmental assessments, and for special projects.

The census of agriculture is intended as a complete enumeration of all farms in the United States. Since 1969, all censuses of agriculture were conducted as a mailout/mailback enumeration of these farmers and ranchers. The methodology has included the building of a list frame of farms and potential farms for this enumeration. It also has included an area frame to measure incompleteness of that list. More recently, a calibration process has been developed to reweight the list respondents to reflect under-coverage.

The definition of a farm used in the census of agriculture is any place from which \$1,000 (U.S. dollars) or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year. This definition was first used in the 1974 census and has been used in all subsequent censuses. Thus, this definition includes as farms some very small operations (or households) that bring in much of their total income from non-farm sources.

Currently, there are approximately two million farms in the U.S., with an increasing percentage operated by individuals belonging to a minority or ethnic group. (Table 1) For example, between 1997 and 2002 there was a 51% increase in the number of principal farm operators of Hispanic heritage, a 20% increase in American Indian principal operators, and an 8% increase in African American principal operators. During that same time frame, there was an overall 4% decrease in Principal operators of all races and ethnicities. Thus overall farm numbers are decreasing at a modest rate, while the percentage of farms operated by individuals belonging to a minority or ethnic group is increasing substantially.

These changes are not limited to certain regions of our country. For example, our states bordering Mexico have always had Hispanic- operated farms. Those numbers are increasing (% increase between 1997 and 2002): Arizona – 53.7%, California – 44.2%, New Mexico – 8.1%, Texas – 52.5%. However, states in other regions that have historically had few Hispanic producers are showing large increases: Delaware – 133%, Idaho – 141%, Michigan – 162%, Wyoming – 126%. The Northeast region showed astounding change: Connecticut – 100%, Maine – 197%, Massachusetts – 204%, New Hampshire – 211%, Vermont – 178%.

We are seeing enclaves of immigrant farmers appearing throughout the U.S. growing specialty fruits and vegetables. These enclaves are often begun by individuals who work as farm laborers on larger operations, save enough money to start a small operation, and encourage family members to join them.

The census of agriculture methodology has traditionally had difficulty counting small farms, especially minority-run farms. First, it is hard to identify these farms and get them on the list frame. This is because they are less likely than other producers to join traditional farm producer associations or to sign up for government farm programs. Second, many ethnic communities are very suspicious of any government inquiry. Fears may be based on previous mistreatment or discrimination, concern about immigration status, and/or a culture that values privacy. Third, the mailout/mailback methodology is problematic for any population with English literacy issues or who may have different cultural interpretation of questions. Fourth, although increasing in numbers, minority owned farms are still reasonably rare and are often grouped in physical proximity. This makes a difficult population for an area frame to estimate effectively. Thus, we have difficulty identifying those farms for inclusion on the list frame, there is poor response from those who do receive a census form, and the measurements of (and adjustments for) under-coverage have larger errors.

The overall coverage adjustment to number of farms for the United States in 2002 was 17.9%. For large farms the adjustment was less than 3%. For African American operated farms the adjustment was 43.9%. For Asian operated farms it was 18.6%. For Hispanic operated farms it was 43.1%.

There has been an even greater issue for under-coverage of Native American farm operators who farm on a reservation. Prior to 1997, an Indian reservation was counted as a single farm operation. In many cases there was a “tribal farm” that was operated collectively by a manager for the tribe. However, in most cases there were also many individual Indian producers on a reservation that operated a farm/ranch independently of the tribal farm. These small farms were not counted prior to 1997. In 1997, NASS implemented a partial step toward counting these farms. A single census questionnaire was filled out by tribal leaders providing the total acres and agricultural production from these independent producers. The tribal leaders also made an estimate of the number of independent farms on the reservation. This information was published in both 1997 and 2002 in an appendix to the main census publication. In 2002, this technique estimated that there were approximately 25% more Indian operators than counted through the existing methodology. Most were in New Mexico and Arizona. As a further step, in 2002, NASS conducted a pilot project to build lists of American Indian farmers on reservations in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. This project was successful, and resulted in the publication of information by Indian reservation in these three states.

The National Agricultural Statistical Service set an agency goal for the 2007 Census of Agriculture to increase the coverage of minority-operated farms by 5 percent. It also made a commitment to work individually with all Indian reservation to build lists of farm operators, to modify collection methodology to accommodate the different culture, and to collect individual census questionnaires on these reservations. In order to achieve these goals, NASS embarked on a multi-year outreach project to build trust, build lists, and improve response from these under-served populations. This paper discusses this project and some preliminary results.

Table 1: Number of Principal¹ operators in the United States, by race and ethnicity for the 1997 and 2002 Censuses of Agriculture, with % change in those numbers.

Black or African American			American Indian or Alaska Native			Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander			Spanish, Hispanic or Latino Origin		
2002	1997	% Chg	2002	1997	% Chg	2002	1997	% Chg	2002	1997	% Chg
29090	26785	8.6	15494	12911	20.0	9358	9620	-2.7	50592	33450	51.2

¹ An operator is someone who makes the day to day decision on a farming operation. A farm may have multiple decision-makers (partners). The Principal operator is defined as the senior operator on a farming enterprise. Thus there is one, and only one, Principal operator per farm. Interpretation of “senior” is left to the respondent.