

Agriculture Counts! The National Agriculture Statistics Survey

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As a result of nomination by the APS Public Policy Board (PPB), I recently began a 2-year commitment to serve on the Federal Advisory Committee for the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The purpose

of this committee is to advise the secretary of agriculture on the conduct of the periodic census and surveys of agriculture and other related surveys and on the types of information to obtain from respondents. The committee also prepares recommendations regarding the content of agriculture reports and the needs for data from major suppliers and users. The NASS mission is to provide timely, accurate, and useful statistics to U.S. agriculture.

You may recall that a little over 1 year ago the APS PPB petitioned the acting secretary of agriculture and the undersecretary for research, education, and economics to reinstate the NASS-conducted Agricultural Chemical Survey Program as it provides information critical to the management of diseases and other crop pests (www.apsnet.org/members/ppb/APSResponsestoPolicyIssues/APS-Nassletter2007.pdf). Since the Agchem Survey Program has not yet been reinstated, one of my goals as an Advisory Committee member was to bring the data needs on agricultural chemicals back to the table. And while I was able to accomplish that objective, I was also thoroughly intrigued with the vast amount of information (besides the Agchem Survey) that NASS collects and provides for use.

The history of collecting data on U.S. agriculture dates back at least as far as President George Washington, who kept meticulous statistical records, describing his own and other farms. The 1790 census counted some 4 million Americans, 9 out of 10 of whom lived on farms; the modern distinction between producers and consumers did not then exist. USDA itself was established by Abraham Lincoln in 1862. He called it "the people's department," and its first crop report appeared in July 1863. NASS traces its roots all the way back to 1863, when USDA established a Division of Statistics.

The Census of Agriculture is the leading source of facts and figures about American agriculture.

Conducted every 5 years, the census provides a detailed picture of U.S. farms and ranches and the people who operate them. It is the only source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every state and county in the United States. NASS has just completed tabulation of the 2007 Census of Agriculture and is preparing for the next census, which takes place in 2012. I encourage you to take a look at these fascinating census results, which are used to set farm policies and programs (www.agcensus.usda.gov).

The 2007 census counted 2,204,792 farms (a farm is defined as any place from which \$1,000 worth of agricultural products were produced and sold) in the United States, a net increase of 75,810 farms. Nearly 300,000 new farms have begun operation since the last census in 2002. Compared with all farms nationwide, these new farms tend to have more diversified production, fewer acres, lower sales, and younger operators who also work off farm. Census results show that the majority of U.S. farms are smaller operations. More than 36% are classified as residential/lifestyle farms, with sales of less than \$250,000 and operators with a primary occupation other than farming.

The NASS Advisory Committee discussed the census and the questionnaire in detail and made several recommendations to the secretary. These included continuing to mandate that the census information remain completely confidential, a recommendation on the need for surveys on the public's knowledge about agriculture and food production, and census "follow-on" surveys to provide data on farm energy production, direct sales, specialty crop production, and agritourism.

With regard to the Agchem Survey Program, we learned that \$2.4 million has been put back into the budget for NASS to begin the "fruit" portion of this important survey. I made the argument that the Agchem Survey Program is the only source of publicly available pesticide use data for the nation and that the program covers 80–90% of the acreage in the United States for the crops in the survey. The NASS data are authoritative for all of the major crops grown in the United States.

The Advisory Committee was also assured that without the Agchem Survey, there are only proprietary sources of data of uncertain accuracy and completeness that cannot be released publicly. Thus, there would be no more

transparency for regulation and no chance for the agricultural community, including APS, to review the assessments for accuracy. Without these data, EPA may resort to simply assuming that 100% of the crops are treated with registered pesticides, which would greatly overestimate risks of these crop protection tools, which are critically important to U.S. growers. The committee agreed and unanimously voted to recommend that the entire Agchem Survey Program be completely reinstated.

This is a first step in bringing this important source of data out of suspension. The \$2.4 million for the fruit survey is in the current budget, but to date there have not been provisions made to find resources to reinstate the entire Agchem Survey Program. PPB will continue to monitor changes in the status and encourage policy makers to find the funding to bring the program back to full implementation. ■

