

Proposals for Census of Agriculture 2012

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Proposed indicators for inclusion in the 2012 Census of Agriculture:

Core purposes:

To add questions to the Census of Agriculture that foster the emergent Community-Based Food Movement, including:

- (a) civic planning to ensure adequacy and security of local food supplies;
- (b) the growth of urban agriculture as a commercial food source and as creation of livelihoods;
- (c) the development of clusters of food-related businesses that create local efficiencies and recycling of dollars through local communities;
- (d) to provide data that offer a more comprehensive understanding of local and regional food systems, including attention to issues broader than farm and production counts.

Assumptions:

- (a) Existing data covering commodity production is in general adequate.
- (b) Peak oil will render the key assumption of the prevailing food system – that oil will be available and affordable — inoperative.
- (c) The emergent community-based food movement will continue to grow whether supported by the federal government or not, but will be stronger with federal investment.
- (d) Data must help assess U.S. food systems from the perspectives of diverse communities.

Boundary issues:

- (a) Census of Agriculture data must be reported at the lowest possible geographic level, allowing for confidentiality concerns, specifically at sub-county, county, watershed, and/or Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) district boundaries.
- (b) Increasingly there will be a critical need to report on food production in inner-city neighborhoods, planning districts, municipalities, and metro regions.
- (c) Confidentiality has been overemphasized, since many “private” business decisions, especially those involving food production, involve public policy and capital resources. Moreover, most business competitors know each other’s businesses well — confidentiality primarily obscures important data from the public, not business competitors. Crucial public discussions require solid production data.

The purposes of data collection in support of community-based food systems are to build:¹

- (a) Community Health
- (b) Community Wealth
- (c) Community Connections, and
- (d) Community Capacities

New questions should be added to the Census of Agriculture in support of all four of these purposes. This is outlined below, and explained in greater depth in the Background section.

Community Health

- (a) Report (or link to) findings of Centers for Disease Control on risk factors, health conditions and health disparities for rural areas as well as urban, and integrate these into Ag Census reports.
- (b) Integrate (or link to) health findings from Kids Count data bases (by county) into Ag Census reports.
- (c) Ask specific questions on the Ag Census form that allow farm families to self-report about health concerns they face, including the impacts of farm practices on their health and well-being, occupational health and safety concerns.

Community Wealth

- (a) Make more economic data available at local geographies, as noted below.
- (b) Integrate reporting with the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and County Business Patterns so issues of food processing, distribution, and consumption can be considered with unified data sets.
- (c) Ask questions that allow farm families to self-report *where* they pay interest on farm debt, whether inside or outside of their own community/county/region. This is a critical measure of whether farm production builds wealth in the locale itself.
- (d) Ask farm families to report off-farm income.
- (e) Report capital and depreciation costs at local levels of geography. Use accepted international standards for calculating depreciation, and harmonize with the Bureau of Economic Analysis.
- (f) Use farm financial data to calculate sample local economic multipliers for representative farm styles and sizes prevailing in each region or locale.

Community Connections

- (a) Adapt social-connection indicators, such as those developed by Robert Putnam, Cornelia Flora, and Crossroads Resource Center, into questions that would be added to the Census to assess social connections in rural and urban communities.
- (b) Ask questions that identify specific direct and indirect local markets where farmers sell — for example, schools, hospitals, prisons, farmers markets, CSA farms, internet sales, cooperative and private distribution channels, retail stores, processors, food shelves, and others.

Community Capacities

- (a) Report on specific training and credentials earned by professionals engaged in the food system.
- (b) Ask farm families to self-report volunteer activity or other community-betterment activities they have engaged in.
- (c) Report completely on urban agricultural food production and processing, and small-scale rural value-added.
- (d) Produce databases that easily integrate into local geographic information systems (GIS) for mapping and local food planning.

Background:

A broad movement is emerging across the U.S., in which farmers and consumers are forming stronger connections with each other, aiming to build clusters of farm, processing, distribution and retail businesses that are intended to both localize food supplies and strengthen local economies.

One clear sign of this trend is that direct food sales — food sold by farmers directly to household consumers — rose 49% to \$1.2 billion in 2007 from \$812 million in 2002.

Although these direct sales are only 0.4% of farm commodity sales, this growth of direct food trade is a clear signal of the interest consumers hold to know where their food comes from, and to have some connection to their food supply — “food with the farmer’s face on it.”²

This growth of interest in local foods has, in turn, spawned demands that farm legislation take a more encompassing view of food. Several have called upon Congress to pass a Food Bill, rather than simply a Farm Bill. This, in turn, places new demands upon data sources — such as the Census of Agriculture.

Given that the Economic Research Service (ERS) is charged with measuring commodity trends, a wealth of data exists concerning commodity production and distribution. The Bureau of Economic Analysis draws upon Census of Agriculture and Economic Research Service data to model income flows in rural counties across the country. Some data on local business activity is available through the Bureau of the Census, and consumer expenditure data is released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Agricultural Research Service is creating new data sets that localizes many existing indicators in ways that will facilitate local and watershed food planning.

Truly, the breadth of data available in the United States presents exceptional opportunities to civic leaders and scholars. Citizens of many nations have limited or no access to essential food system data. Yet there are still immense gaps in the data available, which the Census of Agriculture should fill in 2012.

To identify these gaps, it is of foremost importance to identify the purposes of compiling data in the first place. Only in the context of a specific sense of purpose can specific indicators be selected or evaluated. This also offers an opportunity to outline the assumptions behind our proposal.

First of all, this proposal assumes that existing data covering commodity production is in general adequate. Others closer to commodity issues may disagree with this, and we are open to their concerns, but this proposal will focus on foods that are more directly produced for human consumption, rather than commodities for industrial processing.

Second, our approach identifies the fact that existing commodity trade and food supply chains are both deeply dependent upon the assumption that fossil fuel energy, in the form of oil and its derivatives, will continue to be both (a) available, and (b) inexpensive. With the onset of peak oil, we understand both of these assumptions to be untenable in the near

future. Rather, food planning must be based on ensuring resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Third, our approach assumes that the emergent movement calling for community-based foods (often shortened to the label, “local foods movement”) will continue to grow in strength and will broaden across the nation.

Fourth, this assumption leads to a critical perspective for addressing the complexity of food systems. Given that such complex systems are inherently unknowable, because they encompass and exchange so much information and change over time, the point of view from which any such complex system is viewed will alter our understandings of the system. To be as complete as possible in assessing such complexity, diverse points of view must be taken into account. For example, viewing food systems from the perspective of commodities will yield essentially different insights from other views from the perspective of, say, farm owners, or farm laborers, or farmers of a certain ethnicity. If a community-based food system movement is to be properly served by federal data, that data must allow communities to define their own boundaries and then assess national and global food systems *from the perspective of their own community, and indeed, of each community that has an interest in the food system*. Each effort to assess U.S. food systems from the perspectives of diverse communities, whether defined geographically, ethnically, according to a watershed district, or through some other boundary, will yield fundamentally different insights.

Given these assumptions, we propose that local and regional food planning will be of increasing importance in the future. Indeed, this will be the first time in U.S. history that local and regional governments will begin to plan for secure, resilient food supplies for their own communities. New Census of Agriculture data sets should assist this local planning process. Such planning is indeed invited by the publication of a food planning guide by the American Planning Association.

This proposal is sympathetic with a regional food planning guide published by the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, which outlines the following four purposes of a food system: to build (a) health, (b) wealth, (c) social connection, and (d) technical capacity among community residents.³ Accordingly, data compiled for the Agriculture Census should address all four of these purposes.

Since food planning is inherently local and place-based, data must be available in local geographies, such as county, watershed, RC&D or other NRCS districts, and perhaps even sub-county units in more densely populated areas. Any data that can be reported while ensuring sufficient confidentiality must be reported at the lowest possible level.

Still, the 2007 Census of Agriculture, and more recent business data from BEA, suggest that confidentiality is often taken too far. Too many production items are not reported, often due to concentration of production into larger units that request confidentiality. In many Iowa counties, for example, it has been impossible to get an accurate count of the number of hogs produced, for instance — clear violation of the public interest in knowing how local resources are used. Since public resources are consumed in the construction and operation of such large units, the public has a right to know, for planning purposes, accurate information regarding their production and sales. Typically, these firms’ competitors know with considerable accuracy what financial conditions are; the only people truly kept in the

dark are local civic bodies and citizens, who are often the most affected by negative consequences.

Community Health:

Excellent data summaries exist for metropolitan areas across the U.S. that highlight behavioral risk factors and health conditions in metro areas. These data sources include: Centers for Disease Control's **Behavior Risk Factors Surveillance System (BRFSS)**: Available at <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/brfss-smart/>; and the The Annie E. Casey Foundation "**Kids Count**" data base. For metropolitan areas this data is quite good, but often findings are not reported for rural areas. The Census of Agriculture should work with CDC and other professionals to extend the coverage of these measures to all urban, suburban, and rural counties in the U.S., by asking similar questions in the Census of Agriculture (since many are self-reports about health conditions), and by working with local officials to compile or report data for nonfarm rural citizens. Other questions asking farm families to identify their experiences with health impacts of farming, such as occupational injuries, health impacts of farm chemical use, and related measures should also be incorporated into the Census of Agriculture.

Community Wealth:

Although BEA data show trends in personal income for farm and rural families, and ERS data offer useful figures covering debt-to-asset ratios and interest payments made by farmers, several additional items would be useful for learning more about whether farming is actually building wealth in rural communities. Several indicators suggest that just the opposite is true.

For one thing, many of these data points are available only at a state or national level, not by county or watershed levels. Localizing this data will help communities ascertain how they may want to fine-tune agricultural practices to increase performance in the agricultural sector from their own standpoint. Watershed boundaries are essential since these are the only natural boundaries that may delimit a "foodshed"; county, city, or state lines are arbitrary in the face of climatic or ecological zones.

To make data on interest payments more useful, it would further be important to ask Census respondents not simply how much they pay in interest on farm debt, but also where they pay it. One simple way to break this down would be to report how much interest payments are made to lenders in the same community (or county, or watershed), and how much is paid to more distant lenders. The potential recycling of interest payments back into rural communities is one of the key ways to ensure local capital works for local ends. Large flows of interest payments to distant lenders, conversely, can suggest erosion of capital resources and wealth.

Another key measure would be to track off-farm income for farm families. While this data can be obtained by researchers from IRS for confidential studies, there is no reason this should not be reported in aggregate for each rural county. Canadian agriculture statistics do in fact report this data for sub-regions of Canadian provinces, and this allows Canadian studies to show far more precisely the relative weight of off-farm and on-farm income.

Similarly, Canadian data sources (StatsCan) also show explicitly the costs of capital depreciation. Currently, ERS and BEA data account for this differently; BEA says it hopes

to update its methodology in 2009. Making this an explicit line item in local census data, and expressing this as county- or watershed-level data in BEA databases, would ensure that these accounts can be understood more fully.

Farm business records, as the Census of Agriculture currently compiles, would further allow professionals to perform local multiplier calculations for specific types of farms, using Census data, RIMS, and IMPLAN or other input/output models. This would allow the multiplier generated by farms of different sizes, and of farms with diverse commitments in local trade, to be understood, at least in generic terms, by local planners. These could be reported along with Census findings; this would provide valuable information for making local production and distribution choices, such as choosing business opportunities that were most likely to raise local multipliers.

Community Connections:

Harvard scholar Robert Putnam has created rigorous methods for assessing social connections in community settings; these have been applied in urban and rural communities across the nation. Questions drawn from Putnam's surveys, or other work performed by community-based researchers, should be adapted to create solid measures of community connections (social capital). The pioneering work on rural capitals by the North Central Center for Rural Community Development at Iowa State University could be adapted into other measures of social cohesion. Crossroads Resource Center has worked with resident groups to define straightforward measures of social connection at a community level.

Tests could cover, for example, how many CSA members local farms have, how many farms report a close connection to how many consumers, what percent of farm commodity sales are made locally (within the specified geography) to local consumers, schools, institutions, processors, distributors, food shelves, etc? How much trust do rural residents report of their neighbors, or of types of farm operations? How many times per week do rural families eat together? How many people participate in community-betterment activities? To what extent have community-based food-production businesses created new livelihoods for formerly low-income residents, helping them to ramp out of poverty as well as procure quality food for themselves? These and other measures would give indications of how cohesive rural communities become over time.

Community Capacities:

Community capacities are inherently difficult to measure, yet specific indicators might include the number of farmers who have completed an accredited training program for farm production, business, sustainable agriculture, or organic production. While the number of accredited farmers would be an incomplete measure of the skills of farmers, changes over time in these indicators would suggest patterns of training and competency. Similarly, the number of accredited professionals in food processing, culinary arts, commercial food preparation, and so forth could be useful measures of capacity development.

As urban agriculture emerges as a potent force, it will become increasingly important to measure production of food items in urban neighborhoods, including greenhouses, community gardens, locally oriented processing plants, and local distribution channels will become more important so that civic officials are able to properly perform local food planning. Recalling that during World War II, victory gardens produced more than 40% of the produce consumed by Americans, after only two seasons of gardening, this urban food

production should not be considered trivial, especially in recognition of the fact that many rural farms produce commodities for processing, not foods for direct consumption.

Assessing the Impact of Farm Policies on urban and rural communities.

Finally, the impacts of specific farm programs upon urban and rural Americans must be evaluated on a consistent basis. Much of this evaluation should be performed by professional evaluators, based on state-of-the-art professional protocols, but much of the essential data for informing these evaluations should come from the Census of Agriculture. Rural families could be asked, for example, how they feel they have been impacted by farm programs. It would make sense for these evaluations to follow the four-part set of purposes outlined in this document, above.

¹ Pirog, Rich, *et al* (2006). “Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System: Suggestions for Community-Based Groups,” Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Regional Food System Working Group, Iowa State University, August. Available at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing.htm>.

² Meter, Ken (2003). *Food with the Farmer's Face on it: Emerging Community-Based Food Systems*. Media guide published by W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Available at <http://www.wkkfweb.org/FSRDFullGuide.pdf>.

³ Pirog, Rich, *et al* (2006). “Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System: Suggestions for Community-Based Groups,” Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Regional Food System Working Group, Iowa State University, August. Available at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing.htm>.