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Tools for Community Self-determination

Central Nebraska Local Farm & Food Economy

by Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center (Minneapolis)
for
Center for Rural Affairs
and
USDA Heartland Regional Business Center

With the generous assistance of Hawley Hamlet (Lincoln, Nebraska)

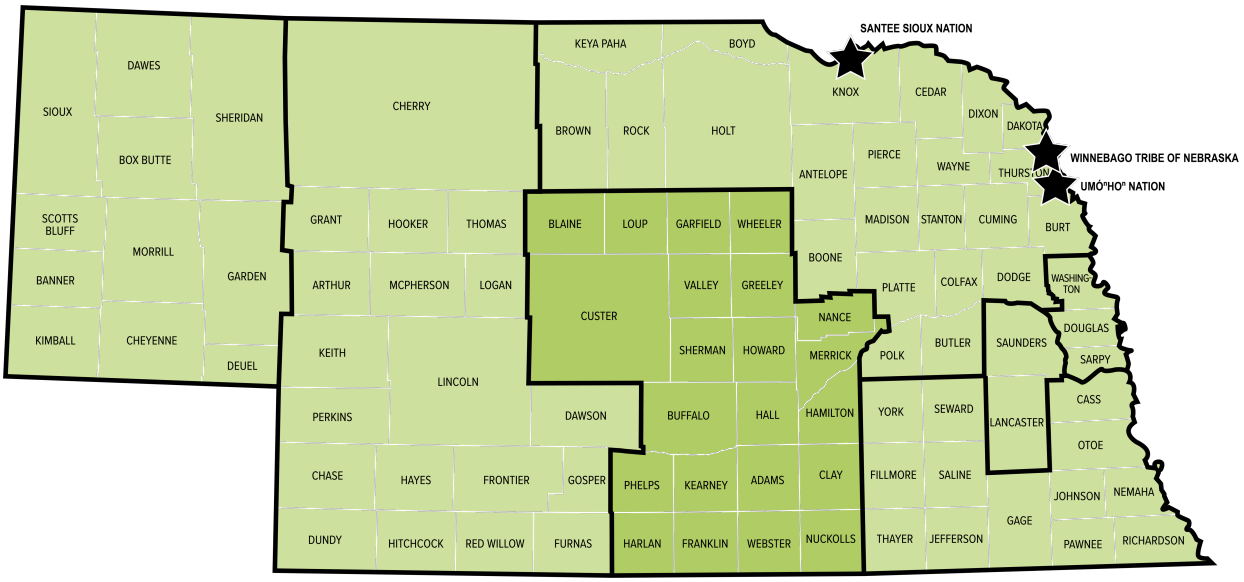
February, 2025

Covers Adams, Blaine, Buffalo, Clay, Custer, Franklin, Garfield, Greeley, Hall, Hamilton, Harlan, Howard, Kearney, Loup, Merrick, Nance, Nuckolls, Phelps, Sherman, Valley, Webster, & Wheeler Counties in Nebraska. (22 Counties)

Photo by Kylie Kai, Center for Rural Affairs

Table of Contents

Central Nebraska



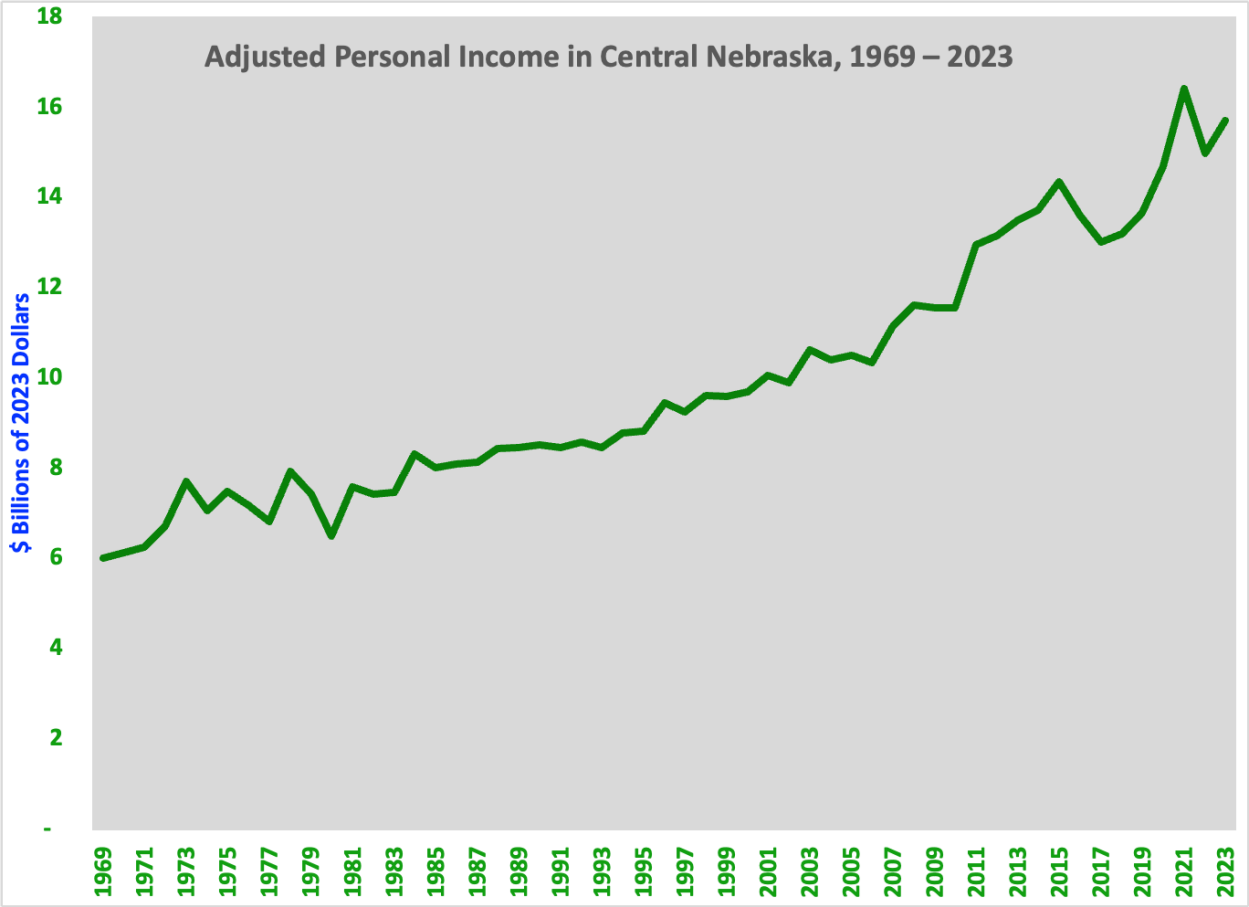
Map by Kylie Kai, Center for Rural Affairs

Personal Income, Poverty, & Food Insecurity

Personal Income in Central Nebraska

229,506 Central Nebraska residents received $15.7 billion of income in 2023 (See Chart 1). This was an increase of 161% from $6.0 billion 1969, with dollars adjusted for inflation.

Chart 1: Adjusted Personal Income in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2023



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index.

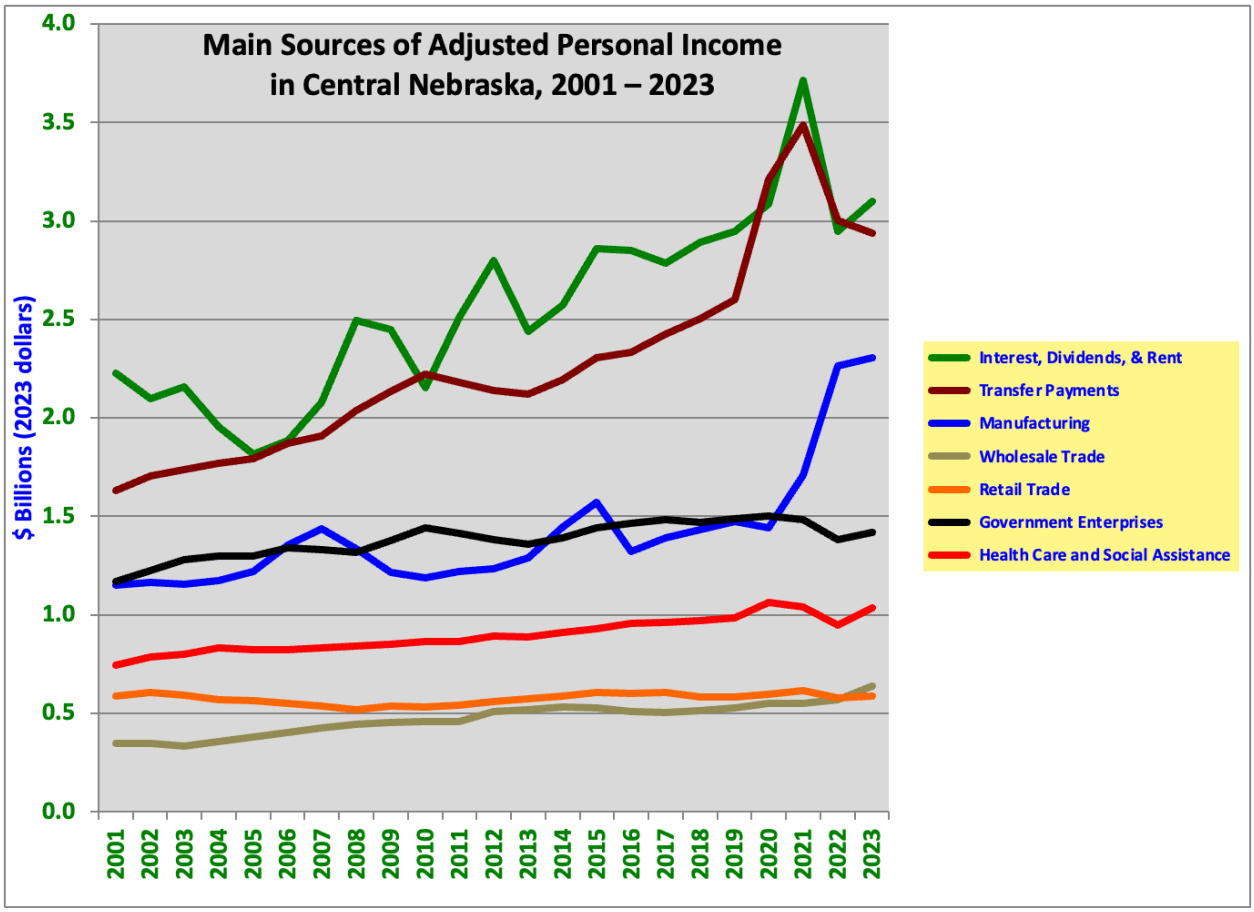
The largest source of personal income is capital income (from interest, rent, and dividends) at $3.1 billion (See Chart 2 below). Transfer payments (from government programs such as pensions) ranked just below, at $2.9 billion. Manufacturing jobs accounted for $2.3 billion. Manufacturing income increased dramatically since the pandemic. Government workers (including educational workers) ranked fourth at $1.4 billion. Health care workers earned another $1 billion.

Income earned from personal transfer payments includes retirement and disability insurance benefits, medical benefits, income maintenance benefits, unemployment insurance; and veterans' benefits. Unfortunately, the Bureau of Economic Analysis stopped publishing detailed estimates of transfer payment sources for counties and states in September, 2024.

Government income includes $156 million of income earned by federal workers and $1.2 billion earned by state and local government workers. Military personnel earned $32 million of personal income.

Note that income from public sources (government jobs and transfer payments) makes up 28% of all personal income in the region.

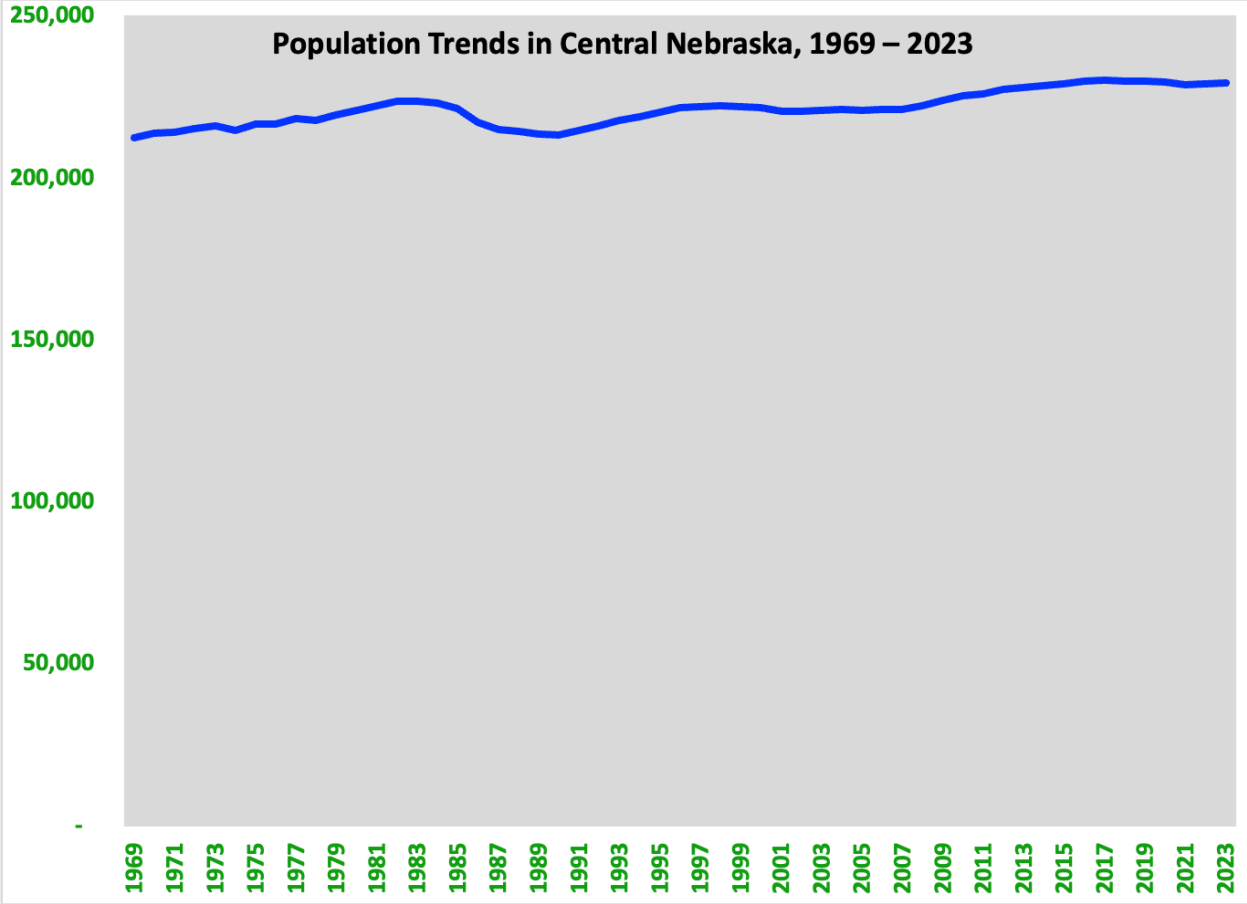
Chart 2: Main Sources of Adjusted Personal Income in Central Nebraska



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index.

Population of the Central region increased 8% since 1969, as shown on Chart 3. Yet the peak population was 230,184 in 2017. Despite the fact this is an important farming region, there has been limited public planning to assure that residents have a secure and resilient food supply.

Chart 3: Population Trends in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2023



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023.

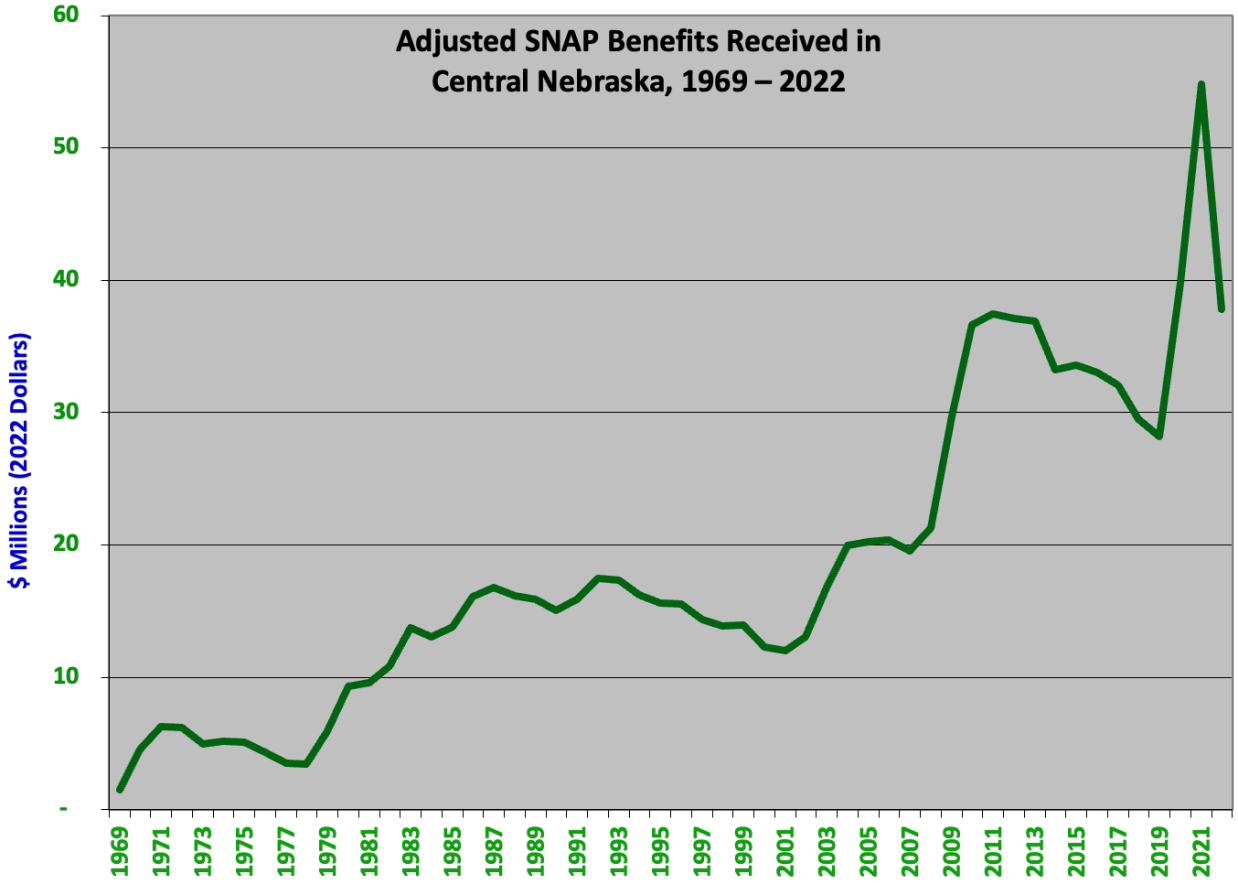
Issues Affecting Low-Income Residents of the Central Nebraska region

Despite rising income for the region as a whole, nearly 55,000 residents (25%) earn less than 185% of federal poverty guidelines. At this level of income, children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch at school under federal programs. This is higher poverty rate than for Metro Omaha (21%) and the same as Metro Lincoln (25%) but lower than the Mid-Plains (29%) or Panhandle (30%). *Sources: Federal Census of 2019–2023; USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.*

5% percent of the region's households (about 4,450 residents) earn less than $10,000 per year. *Source: Federal Census of 2019–2023.*

About 27,000 residents (12%) collected $38 million in SNAP benefits in 2022, down from a pandemic peak of $55 million (See Chart 4). SNAP benefits averaged $24 million for the years 1989–2022. Additional relief is extended to low-wealth mothers through WIC coupons. *Data from Federal Census of 2019–2023, USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, & Bureau of Economic Analysis. Note that BEA stopped reporting SNAP receipts by county in September, 2024, so 2022 figures are the most recent data available.*

Chart 4: Adjusted SNAP Benefits Received in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



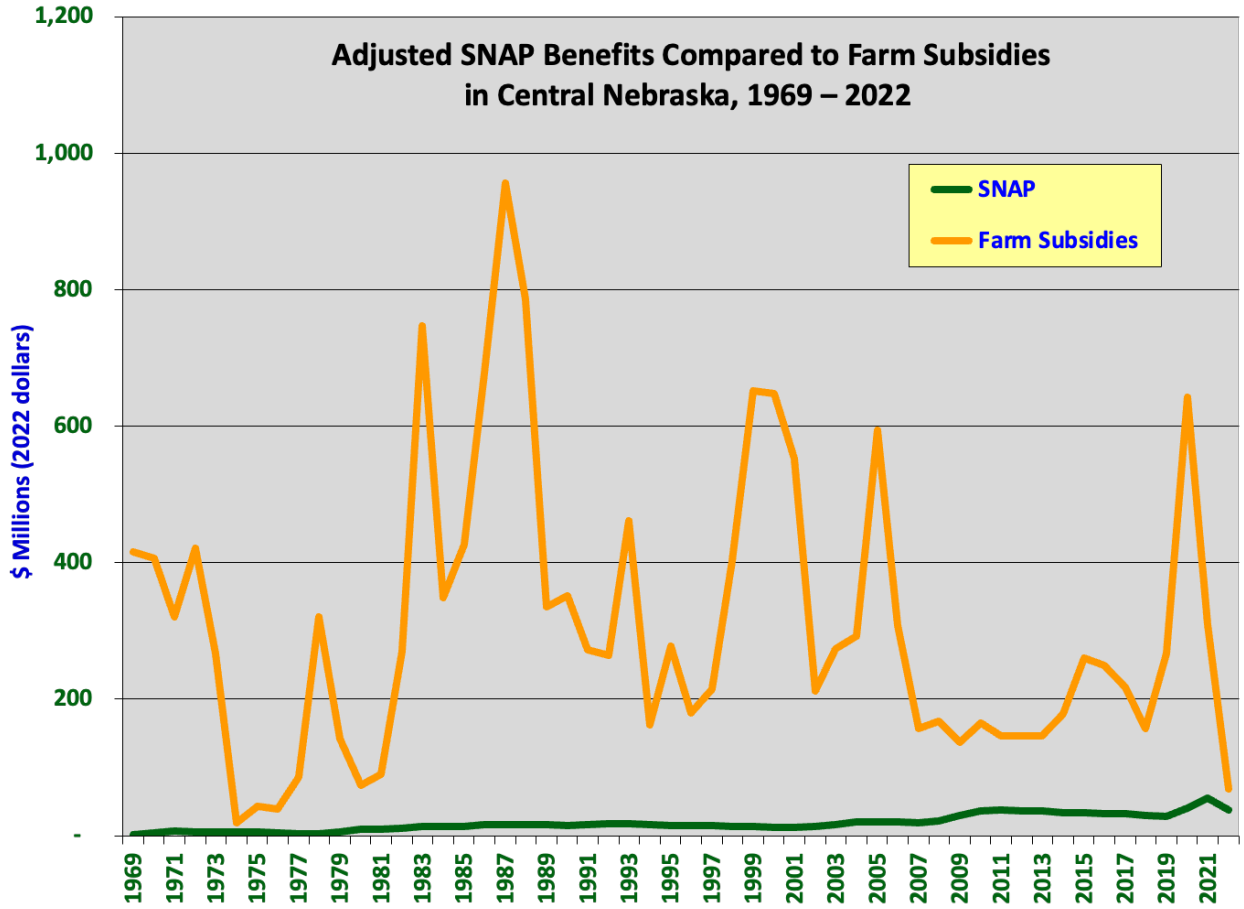
Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. SNAP data for 2023 are not available because BEA no longer publishes these reports.

The rise in SNAP receipts since 2001 has been quite sharp. This poses the question of why a farming region experiencing such a dramatic rise in demand for food relief.

In light of concerns that have been expressed about SNAP benefits, it is useful to compare these benefits to federal subsidies for farmers. 3,461 (40%) of Central Nebraska farmers received a combined total of $54.5 million in subsidies in 2022, mostly to raise crops such as corn or soybeans that are sold as commodities, not to feed local residents. *Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.*

Bureau of Economic Analysis data covering farm income are no longer reported by the agency, since their publication was discontinued in September, 2024. The most recent data available show that Central Nebraska farmers received $69 million in subsidies in 2022. *Note that this is more than the total reported by the USDA NASS Census of Agriculture.* Average federal subsidies to Central Nebraska farmers were $290 million per year during the years 1989–2022. This is 12 times the amount allocated for SNAP benefits. This comparison is shown on Chart 5. *Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022.*

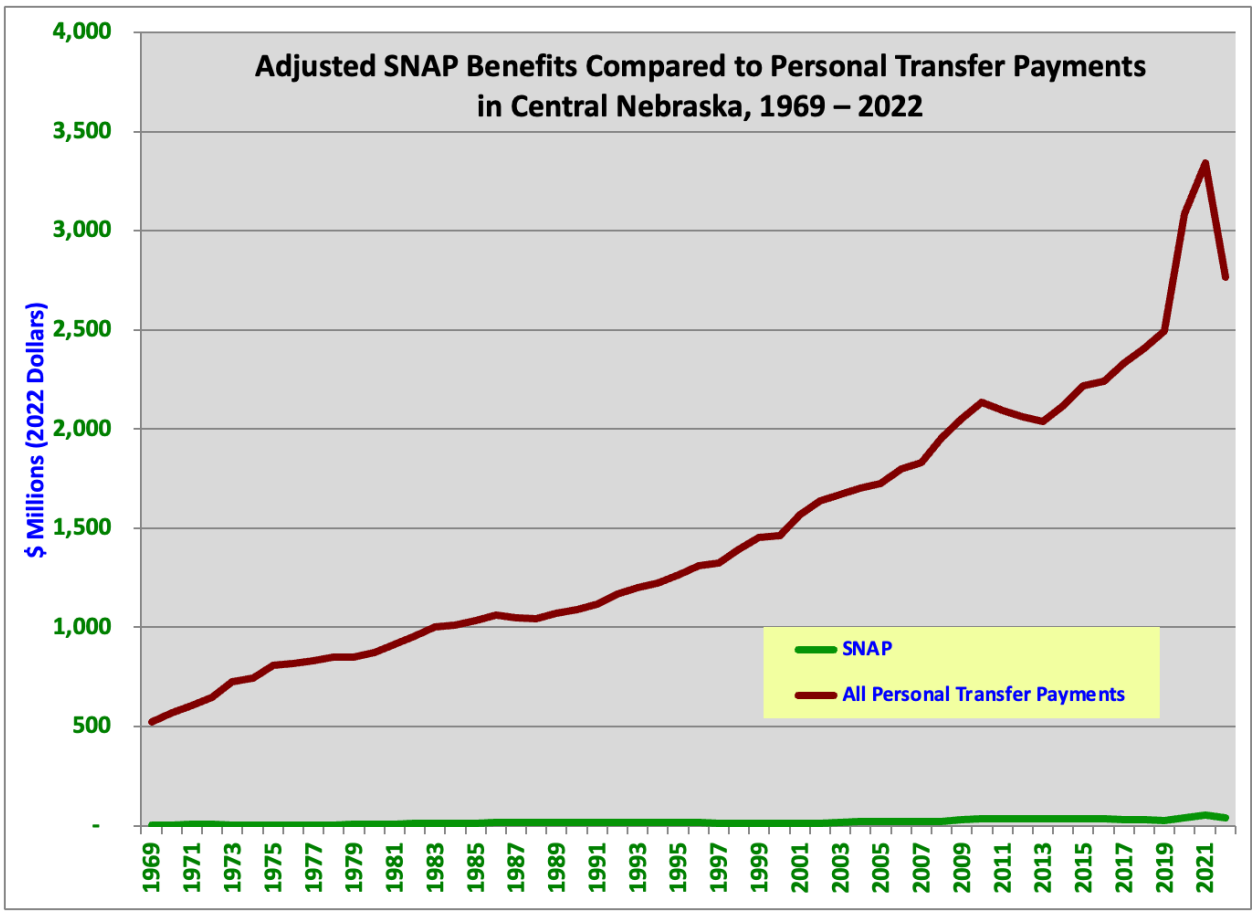
Chart 5: Adjusted SNAP Benefits Compared to Farm Subsidies in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Farm income and SNAP data for 2023 are not available because BEA no longer publishes these data.

It is also useful to compare SNAP benefits to the total of transfer payments received by Central Nebraska residents, as Chart 6 shows. SNAP benefits are included in the total transfer payments depicted on the chart, but are a small amount (1.4%) of transfer payment receipts of $2.8 billion.

Chart 6: Adjusted SNAP Benefits Compared to Personal Transfer Payments in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Transfer payment data for 2023 are not available because BEA no longer publishes these reports.

Although poverty is not the only factor, a considerable proportion of Nebraska residents are at risk because they lack health insurance. No data were reported by CDC covering the counties in the Central region, so we rely upon statewide data to assess this. Statewide, 11% of adults aged 18–64 carried no health insurance in 2023. *Source: Centers for Disease Control. Note that publication of these data was suppressed by the current administration in February, 2025.*

Food-Related Health Conditions

No specific counts for Central Nebraska counties were reported for the following data in this section, so statewide data are provided here. *Note that publication of these data was suppressed by the current administration in February, 2025.*

57% of Nebraska residents reported in 2021 that they eat five or more servings of fruit each day. 43% do not. Vegetable consumption was more prevalent, with 79% of Nebraskans reporting that they eat at least one vegetable per day. 21% do not. These are key indicators of health, since proper fruit and vegetable consumption has been connected to better health outcomes. *Source: Centers for Disease Control. Counts for 2021 are the most recent data available.*

28% of Nebraska adults reported in 2023 that they have at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five or more days per week, or vigorous physical activity for 20 or more minutes for three or more days per week. 72% do not. *Source: Centers for Disease Control.*

10.8% of Nebraska residents have been diagnosed with diabetes as of 2023. *Source: Centers for Disease Control.* Medical costs for treating diabetes and related conditions in Nebraska were estimated at $1.38 billion per year in 2017, and national costs have increased 26% since then. The most recent data show that direct and indirect medical costs of diabetes total $412.9 billion per year nationally. To show the significance of this cost, it amounts to 76% of the total value of all crops and livestock sold by U.S. farmers in 2022. *Source: American Diabetes Association.* Also Parker *et al* (2024). *Economic Costs of Diabetes in the U.S. in 2022; Diabetes Care 2024; 47:26–43; https://doi.org/10.2337/dci23-0085.*

72% of Nebraska residents were overweight (35%) or obese (37%) in 2023. *Source: Centers for Disease Control.*

Central Nebraska's Farms

Data in this section are drawn from the USDA NASS Census of Agriculture unless otherwise noted. Data for 2022 were released in February, 2024. The Census of Agriculture defines a "farm" as "an operation that produces, or would normally produce and sell, $1,000 or more of agricultural products per year."

Farm Characteristics

- 8,659 farms. This is 19% of Nebraska farms.
- Central Nebraska has 7,669,710 acres of farmland, 17% of Nebraska's total.
- Average size is 886 acres, 90% of the state average.
- Estimated market value of an average farm was $3,771,358 in 2022. This is 111% of the Nebraska average.
- 1,831 (21%) Central Nebraska farms are less than 50 acres in size. *See Table 1.*
- 2,067 (24%) of the region's farms are 1,000 acres or more. *See Table 1.*

Farm Product Sales

- Central Nebraska farms sold $7.6 billion of crops and livestock in 2022, 26% of Nebraska's total.
- Of these sales, $3.7 billion (49%) were crop sales, and $3.9 billion (51%) were livestock. These amounted to 27% and 25% of the state total, respectively, both larger than the percentage of the state's farms in Central Nebraska (19%).
- 2,100 Central Nebraska farms sold less than $10,000 of products in 2022. This was 24% of the region's farms. *See Table 2.*
- 4,399 of the region's farms sold more than $100,000, 51% of the region's farms. *See Table 2.*
- 2,022 (23%) of the region's farms sold more than $500,000 of farm products. These farms sold $5.0 billion of products, totaling 66% of the region's sales.
- 3,461 (40%) of the region's farmers received a combined total of $54.5 million in subsidies in 2022.
- 34% of Central Nebraska farms reported a net loss to the Census of Agriculture in 2022. This compares with the statewide average of 38%.

Small & Mid-Size Farmers

Definitions of "small and mid-size" farmers vary according to the type of farming. Here is a breakdown of Central Nebraska farms by size and sales levels.

Table 1: Farms by Size

Farm Size	Farms	Pct of Region
1–9 Acres	663	7.7%
10–49 Acres	1,168	13.5%
50–179 Acres	1,838	21.2%
180–499 Acres	1,714	19.8%
500–999 Acres	1,209	14.0%
1,000 Acres or More	2,067	23.9%

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Table 2: Farms by Sales Range

Sales Range	Farms	Pct of Region
Less than $2,500	1,310	15.1%
$2,500–$4,999	333	3.8%
$5,000–$9,999	457	5.3%
$10,000–$24,999	680	7.9%
$25,000–$49,999	631	7.3%
$50,000–$99,999	849	9.8%
$100,000 or More	4,399	50.8%

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Farm Production Expenses

The region's farmers spent $6 billion to produce crops and livestock in 2022. Detailed expenses are listed below:

Table 3: Farm Production Expenses

	$ Millions
Livestock Purchased	1,122
Feed Purchased	1,027
Fertilizers & Conditioners	501
Depreciation	429
Cash Rents	418
Seeds	345
Chemicals	309
Maintenance & Repairs	285
Other Expenses	229
Fuels & Oils	217
Hired Farm Labor	215
Property Taxes	147
Utilities	111
Interest Expense	102
Custom Work	78
Medical Supplies	66
Equipment Rental	39
Contract Labor	23

Note that this list does not add up to the total value of farm expenses listed above. The sum is about $359 million less, even though Depreciation is not included in USDA total of $6 billion. Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture.

Major Crops and Livestock

As Table 4 shows, Central Nebraska crop farmers primarily grow corn, soybeans, and forage.

Table 4: Top Crops Produced on Central Nebraska Farms, 2022

	Farms	Acres
Corn for Grain	4,299	2,236,086
Soybeans	3,139	1,159,316
Forage	3,168	365,853
Wheat	362	49,966
Sorghum	222	20,493
Oats	24	843

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Cattle and Hogs were the principal livestock raised, as Table 5 shows.

Table 5: Major Livestock Inventories and Number Sold

Livestock	Farms	Inventory	Sold
Cattle & Calves	3,856	1,620,505	1,926,109
Hogs & Pigs	140	329,567	1,673,610
Laying Hens	524	119,090	N/A
Sheep & Lambs	205	17,245	N/A
Broilers	26	N/A	18

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

The same crops and livestock, of course, account for most farm product sales, as Table 6 and Chart 7 show.

Table 6: Central Nebraska's Top Farm Products in 2022

Note: Considerable data have been suppressed for several of the counties in Central region, as USDA attempts to protect the confidentiality of individual farms. This means that totals cannot be comprehensively reported for the Central Nebraska region. The data in Table 6 and the pie chart below represent ***minimum*** *values.*

See also Chart 7 on next page.

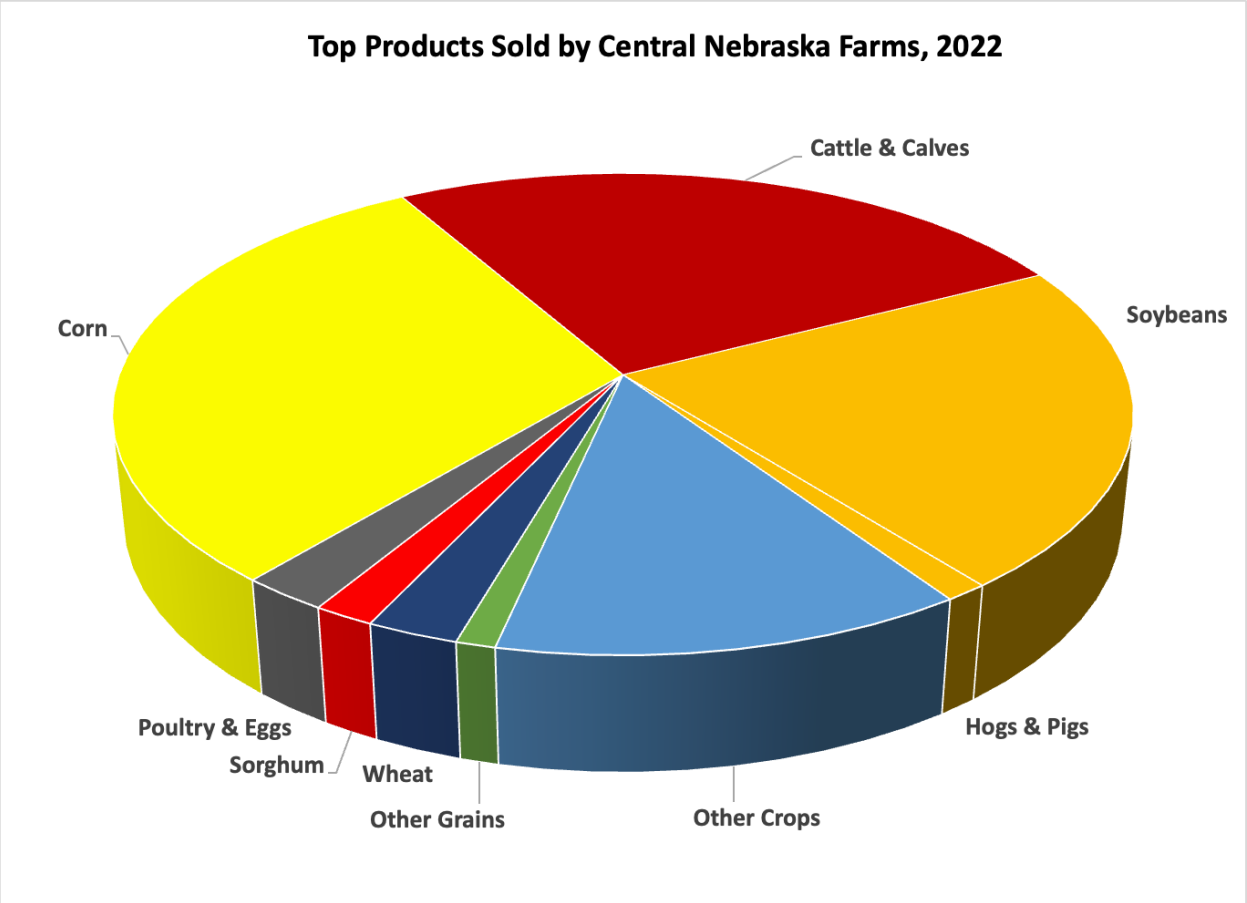
	Farms	$ Millions
Corn	4,383	2,705.5
Cattle & Calves	3,700	1,956.7
Soybeans	3,139	863.7
Hogs & Pigs	171	81.5
Other Crops	1,851	55.2
Other Grains	156	31.6
Wheat	362	15.1
Sorghum	241	8.5
Poultry & Eggs	345	7.1
Nursery & Greenhouse	41	4.8
Vegetables & Potatoes	91	4.5
Other Livestock	142	4.2
Sheep & Goats	4,062	4.1
Horses & Ponies	3,662	0.3
Fruits, Nuts, & Berries	54	0.1

Note that at $7.8 million, direct sales from farmers to household consumers, retail stores, institutions and food hubs, and including value-added products, amount to more than the value of the 9th-ranking product, Poultry. *See details below.* Of course, many of these direct sales are also included in the totals listed above (for example, meat, vegetable, and fruit sales). Organic product sales, at $19.5 million, surpassed the Wheat crop in value.

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Chart 7: Central Nebraska's Top Farm Products in 2022

Data from Table 6 on previous page. Note that this data set is incomplete due to data suppression.



Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Foods Raised More Directly for Household Consumption

Direct Sales

Table 7: Direct Sales to Households & Institutions

	Farms 2022	Sales $ 2022	Farms 2017	Sales $ 2017
Direct to Households	219	3,842,000	219	1,948,000
Direct to Retail & Institutions	48	933,000	41	1,664,000
Value-Added Products	52	3,024,000	49	468,000

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022. Note once again that due to data suppression in 16 counties, comprehensive findings cannot be reported. Nor can trends be accurately drawn from 2017 to 2022. The numbers in the table above and narrative below are ***minimum*** *values.*

219 (3%) of Central Nebraska farms sold $3.8 million of farm products directly to household consumers in 2022. This was the same number of farms that sold direct five years before.

48 (1%) farms sold $933,000 of products directly to retailers, institutions, and food hubs.

52 (1 %) farms sold $3.0 million of value-added products in 2022.

Vegetables, Potatoes, & Orchards

At least 91 Central Nebraska farms raise 1,183 acres of vegetables, with another 28 farms raising 1,033 acres of potatoes. 53 farms operate 83 acres of orchard.

Table 8: Vegetables, Potatoes, & Orchards on Central Nebraska Farms

Crop	Farms	Acres
Vegetables	91	1,183
Potatoes	28	1,033
Orchards	53	83

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Note: *Once again, it should be kept in mind that data from rural counties in the Central region is often suppressed. Most of the vegetable production shown in Table 8 came from Merrick and Phelps Counties. Howard County hosted more than half of the orchard acreage. Actual totals could be considerably higher than what is shown here.*

Organic Food Sales

Although sales data were suppressed by USDA for 9 counties, at minimum 43 Central Nebraska farms reported selling at least $19.5 million of organic products. Sales were strongest in Hamilton, Adams, and Webster Counties.

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Farm Operator Characteristics

Race & Ethnicity

Central Nebraska's farm operators are predominantly White, as Table 9 shows. Note that Hispanic (or Latino) identity is an ethnicity, not a race.

Table 9: Farm Operators by Race & Ethnicity

Producers by Race	Number	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	18	0.12%
Asian	7	0.05%
Black or African-American	3	0.02%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.01%
White	15,496	99.68%
More than One Race	21	0.14%
Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity	100	0.64%

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Female Producers

Female producers are very important to Central Nebraska's farm community. 4,443 Farms (51%) have female producers. These women manage, or co-manage, 45% of the region's farm acreage.

Table 10: Female Producers

Farms	Female Producers	Acreage
4,443	4,935	3,434,143

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Young Producers

Central Nebraska has 2,156 young producers. This is 24% of the young producers in the state. USDA defines "young producers" as those who are 34 years old or younger.

Table 11: Young Producers

Young Producers	Percent of Nebraska
2,156	24%

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Active Military or Veteran Producers

Central Nebraska hosts 1,173 veteran or active military farmers.

Table 12: Active Military or Veteran Producers

Military/Veterans	Percent of Nebraska
1,173	20%

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Farm Ownership

Most (91%) Central Nebraska farms are owned by families or family corporations. These own 79% of the region's acreage.

Table 13: Farm Ownership

Type of Ownership	Farms	Acres
Family or Individual	6,753	3,376,472
Partnership	597	1,082,737
Corporation (Family)	1,101	1,398,477
Corporation (Other)	77	63,011
Estate, Trust, Prison, Association, or Native Reservation, etc.	131	127,248

Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Conservation Practices

As Table 14 shows, Central Nebraska Farms were more likely to rely upon Bureau of Reclamation Irrigation water than farmers in the rest of the state, with 35% of the region's farms drawing upon this irrigation source. Fewer farms practiced special cropping techniques. Other practices were largely in line with the region's share of Nebraska farms.

Table 14: Farms Adopting Conservation Practices in Central Nebraska, 2022

	Farms	Pct of Nebraska
Used Bureau of Reclamation Irrigation	345	35%
Practiced Alley Cropping, Silvopasturing, or Riparian Buffers	46	13%
Harvested Biomass for Renewable Energy	48	20%
Practiced Rotational Grazing or Intensive Management	1,281	23%
Had On-farm Packing Facility	18	21%

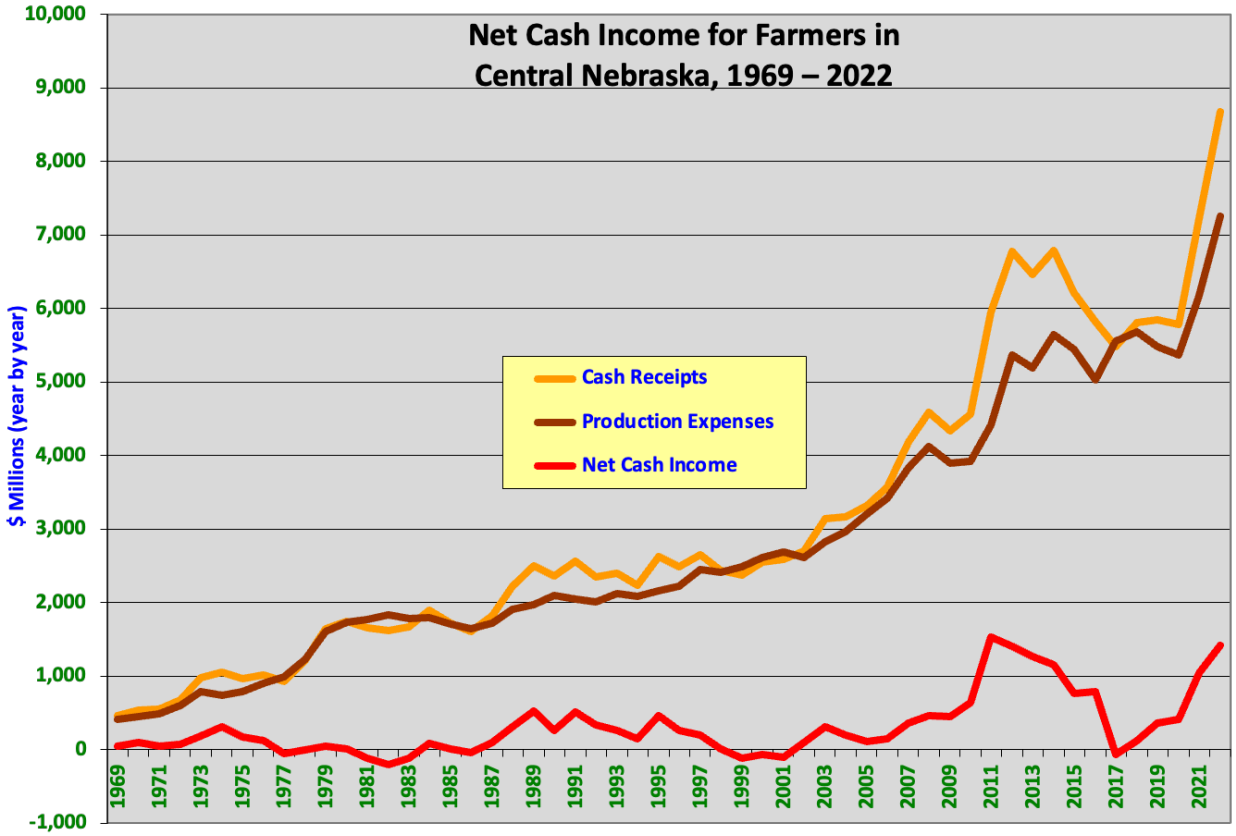
Source: USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, 2022.

Farm Income in Central Nebraska

Net Cash Income

The following section considers the Net Cash Income received by Central Nebraska farmers. Net Cash Income is a measure of the returns farmers earn from the act of producing crops and livestock. It is calculated by subtracting Production Expenses (maroon line on the following charts) from Cash Receipts (orange line). This is a different measure than "Net Income," which typically includes other sources of income such as federal subsidies and cash rental income. In our experience Net Cash Income is a more nuanced measure of the state of the regional food and farm economy. Net Cash Income is shown below with a red line.

Chart 8: Net Cash Income For Farmers in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



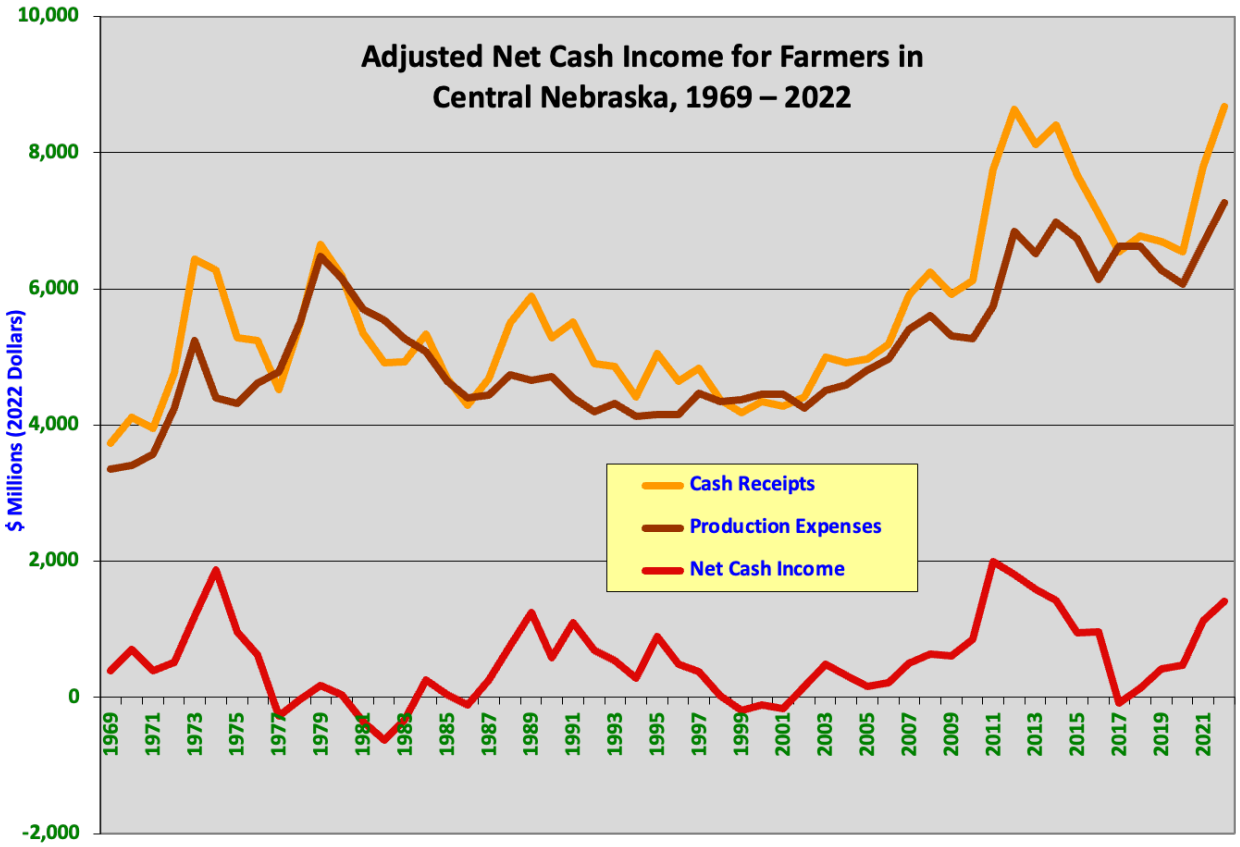
Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Note that these data are no longer reported by BEA; 2023 data are not available.

Chart 8 shows that Central Nebraska farmers have vastly increased sales over the past 54 years, from $468 million in 1969 to $8.7 billion in 2022. That is a 17-fold increase, and signifies tremendous growth in revenue. *Note that BEA no longer reports farm income data, so no 2023 data are available. Note also, that these data differ slightly from those reported by USDA NASS Census of Agriculture, shown above.*

Unfortunately, the chart also shows that production expenses have risen in concert with cash receipts. From 1969 to 2010, then, the net cash income earned by farmers held fairly steady at low levels. In eight of those 42 years, net cash income fell below zero for the entire Central Nebraska farm sector. Something dramatic happened in 2011 to increase margins, but these data do not tell us what that change was. Moreover, even after that peak, net cash income fell below zero again in 2017. It later rose to a surplus of $1.4 billion in 2022. Thus, profitability for the farm sector is uncertain. It would be difficult to conclude that merely increasing sales means increased margins.

However, it is also important to take inflation into account when examining these results. Chart 9 does just that, taking the very same data set and adjusting for the rise in the cost of living by expressing all values in 2022 dollars. Once this adjustment has been made, very different patterns emerge.

Chart 9: Adjusted Net Cash Income For Farmers in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Note that these data are no longer reported by BEA; 2023 data are not available.

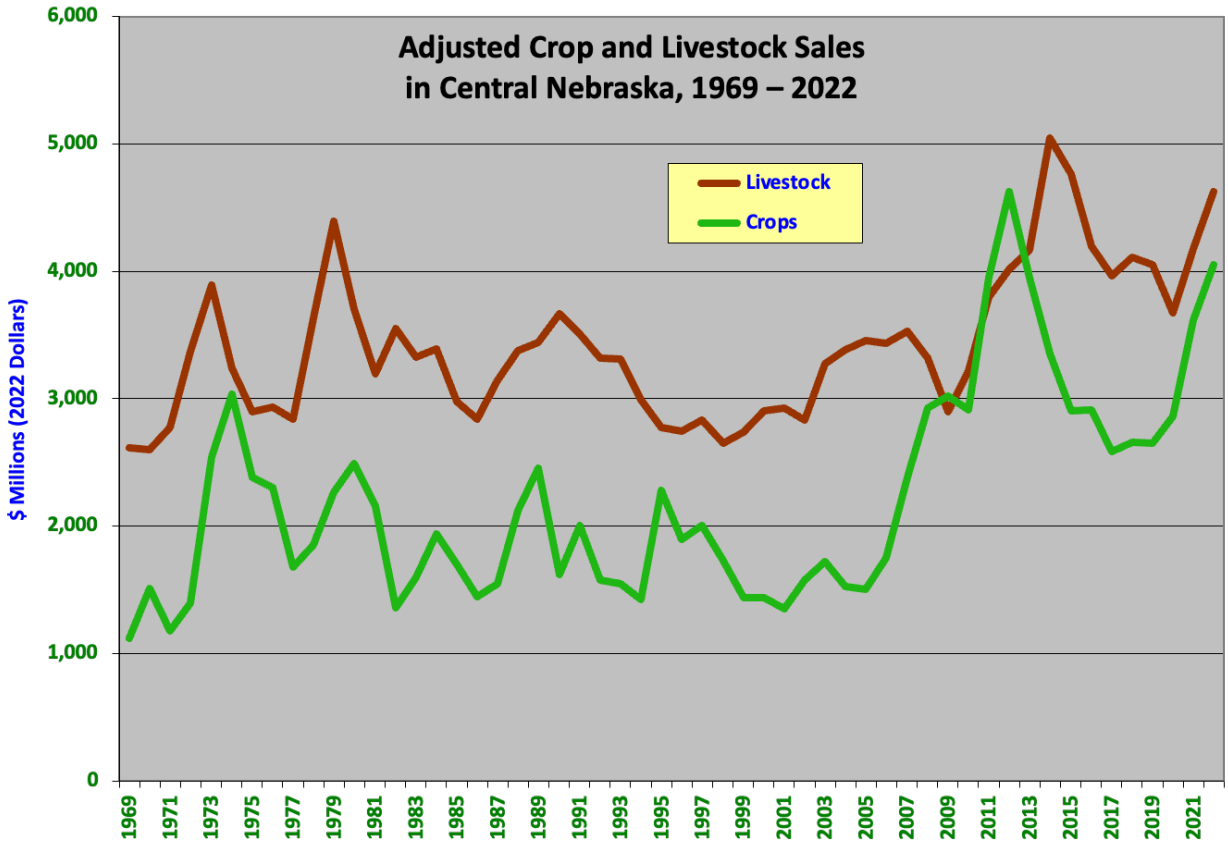
Once adjusted for inflation, the growth in sales is not nearly so dramatic, but is still robust. The value of cash receipts earned by the region's farmers rose 130 percent from $3.7 billion to $8.7 billion in 2022 dollars. Net cash income held fairly steady across this 54-year period, falling below zero for 9 years. Although the peak income of $2 billion was realized in 2011, this was just barely above the peak experienced in 1974 during the OPEC energy crisis, when US farmers enjoyed rising prices for a couple of years. These years of peak prosperity, however, are always short-lived.

To assess the strength of the farm sector, it is useful to calculate returns since 1989, after the upheavals of the Farm Credit Crisis of the 1980s had settled down. Over those 34 years, Central Nebraska farmers averaged a net cash income of $645 million, despite suffering an overall loss in 2017. On average, the region's farmers sold $5.9 billion of products, spending $5.3 billion to raise these commodities. This resulted in an aggregate surplus of $22 billion over those 34 years; a significant contribution to the regional economy.

However, with the terms of trade for the agricultural sector being so uncertain, this leaves open the question of how much more money farmers might have been made if prices were more rewarding and if farmers raised more of their own inputs.

The next chart, Chart 10, offers a glimpse into what prompted the more prosperous year in 2011. This shows that there was a boom in sales for both crops and livestock sold by Central Nebraska farmers. Both sales were fairly level from 1969 to 2005. Sales of crops rose quickly. A few years later, livestock sales rose, perhaps in part because feed costs rose. It also appears that buyers were willing to pay more for livestock than they were for grains. The losses in 2017 appear to have been led by declines in crop sales, although livestock sales fell as well. *This chart is also expressed in inflation-adjusted dollars.*

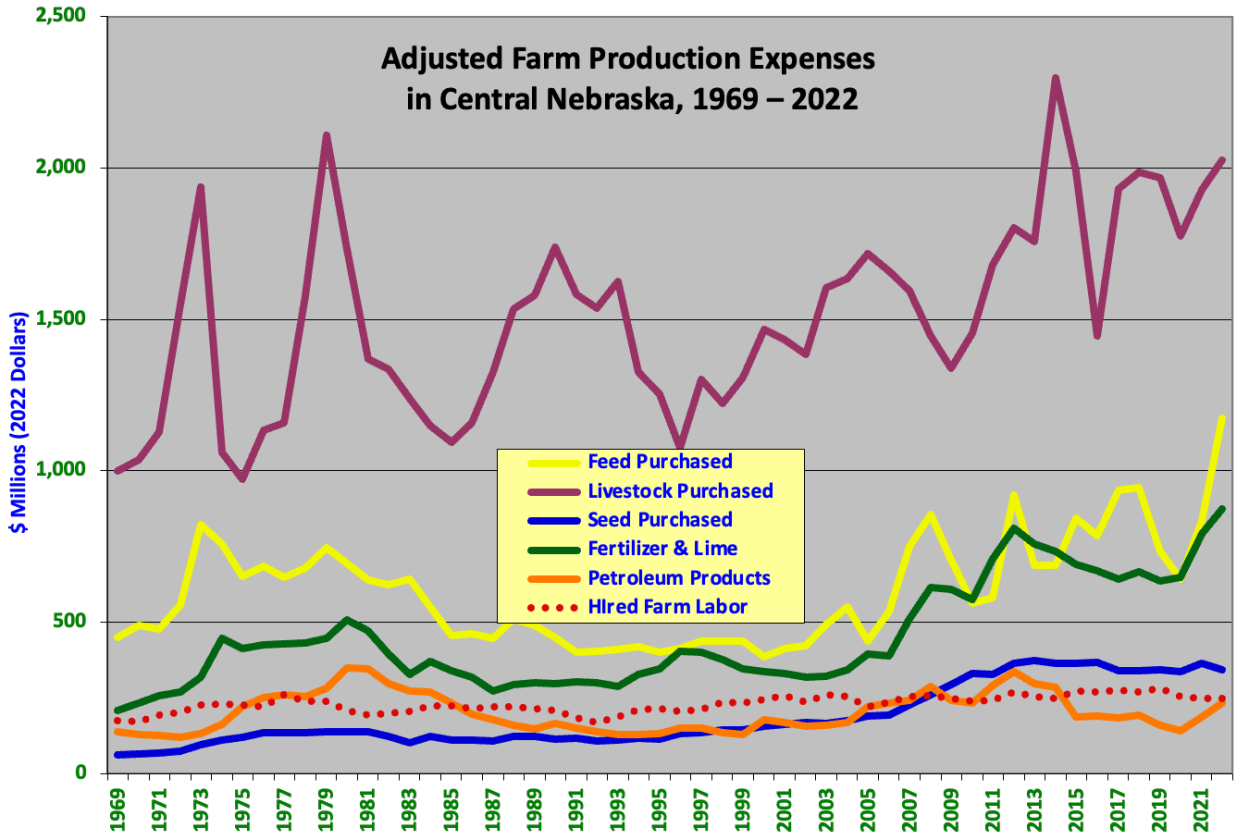
Chart 10: Adjusted Crop and Livestock Sales in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Note that these data are no longer reported by BEA; 2023 data are not available.

A still more complete picture emerges once we consider the costs of production (*See Chart 11).* Rising production costs have been led by rising expenditures for livestock, feed, and fertilizers. Rising seed costs also play a lesser role. Farmers have effectively held labor costs quite steady, while reducing fuel and oil use. *Once again, these have been adjusted for inflation.*

Chart 11: Adjusted Farm Production Expenses in Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Note that these data are no longer reported by BEA; 2023 data are not available.

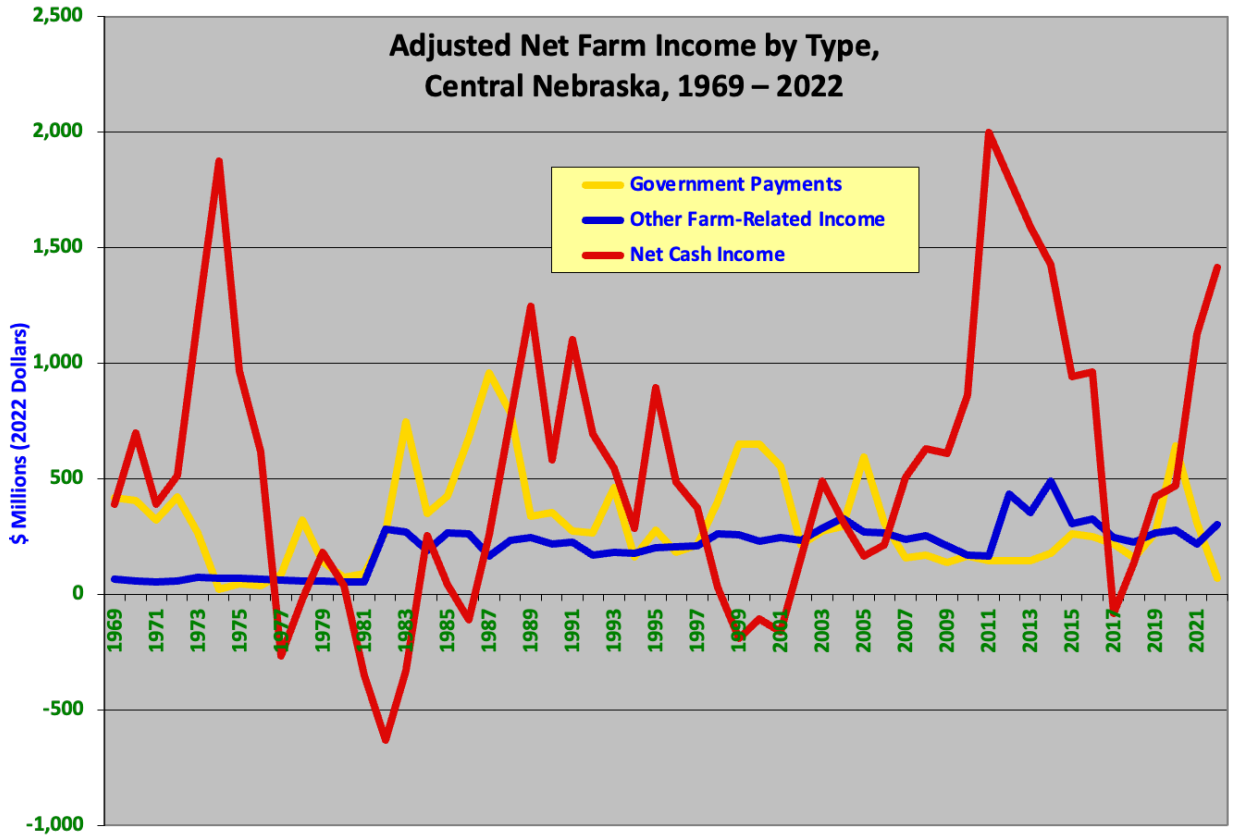
From the perspective of farm laborers, however, steady labor costs means that labor is largely not benefitting from the increased sales farmers have enjoyed. From the perspective of the region as a whole, many of the rising costs are expenses for purchasing inputs sourced outside of the region, sending billions of dollars out of Central Nebraska.

Finally, it is useful to consider all forms of net income enjoyed by Central Nebraska farmers. These are shown on Chart 12. This chart shows that government payments are a relatively discrete source of income. As countercyclical payments, they are meant to fill gaps left by uncertain markets. Nonetheless they averaged $290 million during the years 1989 to 2022. This represents 45% of the $645 million earned in net cash income. However, the chart also shows that government payments surpassed net cash income in 10 of the past 34 years, and 22 of the past 54 years.

The next most important source of income is farm-related income, which largely is cash rents for renting farmland to a tenant farmer or performing custom field work. This has held at a fairly steady average of $255 million per year, with a noticeable bump upward in 2011 when farmers enjoyed higher cash receipts. That suggests that when landowners saw that farmgate prices were high they charged their tenants higher rents. Notably, cash rents are the most stable form of net income and

also amount to 39% of the value of net cash income. For many landowners, it makes more sense to rent out land than to farm it, displacing the risks of farming onto someone else.

Chart 12: Adjusted Net Farm Income by Type, Central Nebraska, 1969 – 2022



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022. Adjusted for inflation using the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Consumer Price Index. Note that these data are no longer reported by BEA; 2023 data are not available.

Farm & Food Economy Summary

Missing Data

For two decades, Crossroads Resource Center has produced studies of local farm and food economies that centered around the comprehensive and potent data bases compiled by the Bureau of Economic Analysis to assist community planning efforts. Unfortunately, the agency announced in September, 2024, that it was terminating publication of two critical data sets. These missing data covered both farm income and transfer payments. They had been reported for each county and state in the U.S., and were made available through an exceptionally user-friendly web platform. BEA cited budgetary constraints in its announcement that these data would no longer be published.

This removes a powerful way for Americans to learn about the realities of rural economies, most of which are both based on farm production, and heavily reliant upon transfer payments.

The agency still offers archived data for the time period 1969–2022. This is most recent available data. Future policy discussions will be hampered by the lack of updated tallies. Having access to detailed estimates of farm income and transfer payments can be very important to creating a civil discourse that is based upon solid data, rather than conjecture.

We have found BEA data to be more valuable than many other data sets that are available, for several reasons: (1) No other data sets drilled down to provide robust estimates for each county in the nation, making it easy to identify long-term trends that have evolved over more than 50 years. (2) Because data were collected to strengthen local economic development planning, they were more balanced than specific data sets reported by agencies that have more specialized interests centered upon their professional focus. (3) It was extremely easy to use.

Central Nebraska Summary

8,659 Central Nebraska farmers sell an average of $5.9 billion of food commodities per year (1989–2022 average), spending $5.2 billion to raise them, for an average gain of $645 million each year. This is an average net cash income of $74,500 per farm. *Note that these sales figures compiled by the BEA may differ from cash receipts recorded by the USDA Agriculture Census (above).*

Overall, farm producers earned a surplus of $22 billion by selling crops and livestock over the years 1989–2022. Yet farm production costs exceeded cash receipts for 9 years of that 34-year period. Moreover, 34% of the region's farms reported net losses in 2022.

Federal farm support payments are a complementary source of net income, averaging $290 million per year for the region (34-year average for 1989–2022). Farmers and ranchers earn another $255 million per year of farm-related income — primarily custom field work, and land rental income for the same years.

Many of the farm inputs farmers purchased (for example, tractors, combines, fuel, chemicals, etc.) were sourced outside of the region. This created a significant cash flow (perhaps $2 billion or more) away from the region. This is difficult to measure precisely.

The region's farmers spent more feeding livestock ($1 billion) than would be required to feed the entire Central Nebraska population for a year. Indeed, there are 7 times as many cattle living in Central Nebraska as people. Massive infrastructure has been constructed to ensure that these animals are fed, but similar infrastructure is lacking for conveying healthy food from local farms to Central Nebraska residents.

Central Nebraska Consumers

See also information covering low-income food consumption and food-related health conditions, page 1–2 above.

229,506 Central Nebraska consumers spend $841 million buying food each year, including $529 million for home use. Most of this food is produced outside the region, so consumers spend more than $750 million per year buying food sourced outside Central Nebraska. This is more than the net

cash income that farmers earn. Only $3.8 million of food products (0.05% of farm cash receipts and 0.46% of the region's consumer market) are sold by farmers directly to household consumers.

Farm and Food Economy Summary

Farmers earn $645 million each year producing food commodities, while spending more than $2 billion buying inputs sourced outside of the region. Even when farmers make money, these input purchases result in substantial losses to the region as a whole.

Meanwhile, consumers spend $750 million buying food sourced outside the region. If each Central Nebraska resident purchased (or had purchased for them) $5 of food each week directly from some farm in the region, this would generate $60 million of new farm income for the region. This would amount to a small increment to farm cash receipts, but would create social and economic connections between farmers and consumers.

Household Food Consumption

Household consumption estimates are compiled using Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey data.

Central Nebraska

Table 15: Central Nebraska Markets for Food Eaten at Home (2023)

229,506 Central Nebraska residents purchase $841 million of food each year, including $529 million to eat at home. Home purchases break down in the following way:

	$ Millions
Meats, Poultry, Fish, & Eggs	109
Fruits & Vegetables	99
Cereals & Bakery Products	67
Dairy Products	50
"Other," incl. Sweets, Fats, & Oils	204

If Central Nebraska residents purchased (or had purchased for them) $5 of food for home use directly from farmers in the region, this would generate $60 million of new farm income for Central Nebraska.

Although the prevailing food system infrastructure is far more efficient at routing food to metro areas than to Central Nebraska residents, the market for food in the region is 74% of the Metro Lincoln market, as Table 16 shows.

Lincoln Metro

Table 16: Lincoln Metro Markets for Food Eaten at Home (2023)

350,179 Lincoln Metro residents purchase $1.3 billion of food each year, including $808 million to eat at home. Home purchases break down in the following way:

	$ Millions
Meats, Poultry, Fish, & Eggs	167
Fruits & Vegetables	151
Cereals & Bakery Products	102
Dairy Products	76
"Other," incl. Sweets, Fats, & Oils	312

If Metro Lincoln residents purchased (or had purchased for them) $5 of food for home use directly from farmers in the region, this would generate $91 million of new income for the region's farms.

State of Nebraska

Table 17: State of Nebraska Markets for Food Eaten at Home (2023)

1,978,379 Nebraska residents purchase $7.2 billion of food each year, including $4.6 billion to eat at home. Home purchases break down in the following way:

	$ Millions
Meats, Poultry, Fish, & Eggs	942
Fruits & Vegetables	854
Cereals & Bakery Products	577
Dairy Products	429
"Other," incl. Sweets, Fats, & Oils	1,760

If Nebraska residents purchased (or had purchased for them) $5 of food for home use directly from farmers in the region, this would generate $514 million of new farm income for the state.

Key Data Sources

Bureau of Economic Analysis data covering regional personal income
https://apps.bea.gov/itable/?ReqID=70&step=1

Food consumption estimates from Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey
http://www.bls.gov/cex/home.htm

USDA NASS Census of Agriculture
http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/

USDA/Economic Research Service food consumption data:
http://ers.usda.gov/Data/

USDA/ Economic Research Service farm income data:
http://ers.usda.gov/Data/

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey. https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/data_tools.htm

For more information:

To see results from *Finding Food in Farm Country* studies in other regions of the U.S.:
http://www.crcworks.org/?submit=fffc

To read the original *Finding Food in Farm Country* study from Southeast Minnesota (written for the Experiment in Rural Cooperation in 2001): http://www.crcworks.org/ff.pdf

A more detailed summary is available for the State of Nebraska: "Nebraska Farm & Food Economy Data Compilation" by Ken Meter for Center for Rural Affairs (June, 2024).
http://www.crcworks.org/nebfood24.pdf

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All CRC studies are posted at http://www.crcworks.org/

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