Ohio Agriculture: The Changing Contours of Farming

The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association's analysis of the U.S .Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service five-year survey of agriculture, highlighting Ohio

June 2019

Introduction

The new 2017 *Census of Agriculture* provides data on important changes in key agricultural topics at the national, state, and county levels. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) mailed approximately three million questionnaires and received a 72 percent response rate, with the most responses coming from the Midwest. The 29th National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Census of Agriculture solicited information from any operation where $1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year. The census also provides important information about patterns of land use.

This information not only can inform programs, businesses, policy, and more, but also has important national security implications. It describes our ability to have an abundant and secure food supply in a rapidly changing, often erratic climate, current and potential contributions to community and farm economic viability, and public health.

Farm Demographics

The 2017 survey reveals an almost 7 percent increase in producers nationally. * ***The USDA now counts more than one "principal operator" resulting in the first true accounting of women farmers.***

One of the agricultural statistics most frequently cited is the ever-increasing average age of farmers. As the total population of farmers ages, the need to support next generation farmers becomes more critical. Nationally, the average age of all farmers increased from 56.3 in 2012 to 57.5 in 2017, with primary farmers averaging 59.4 years of age. While the average age of farmers in Ohio is slightly lower, it is also on the rise: from 54.6 in 2012 to 55.8 in 2017. While farmers are aging, next generation farmers are stepping up in Ohio as the state ***is in the top 10 in the number of beginning farmers.***

* *The 2017 Census of Agriculture changed the way information on producers is collected. In the past, the USDA looked at "principal operator," but this census collected information on up to four operators involved in farm decision-making per farm, revealing more detailed information on beginning and women farmers and an overall increase in the number of farmers counted.*

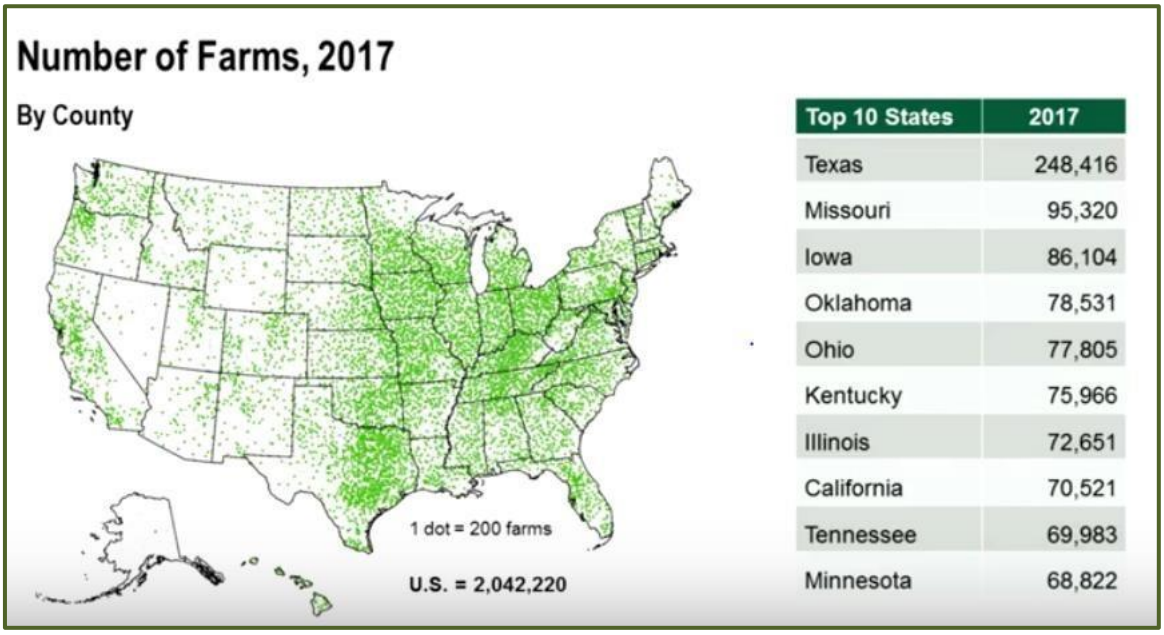
NEW AND BEGINNING PRODUCERS

Texas	188,999
Missouri	41,416
Oklahoma	38,677
Kentucky	35,433
California	34,571
Ohio	33,883
Indiana	31,183
Tennessee	30,953
Illinois	26,995
Florida	24,738

Farms and Land in Farms

On the national level, there are 2.04 million farms (down more than 3 .2 percent from 2012) and 3.4 million farmers and ranchers More than 900,000,000 acres are devoted to farming in America, down 1.6 percent from 2012.

With 13,965,295 acres in farming, ***Ohio farmland has increased*** by almost 4,700 acres. While that is a relatively small number compared to overall acreage, Ohio did not lose farmland and productive farmland increased for the first time since 2002. **Ohio is home to more than 77,000 farms, the highest number of farms since 1997. After decades of farm loss, the number of farms is on the rise.**



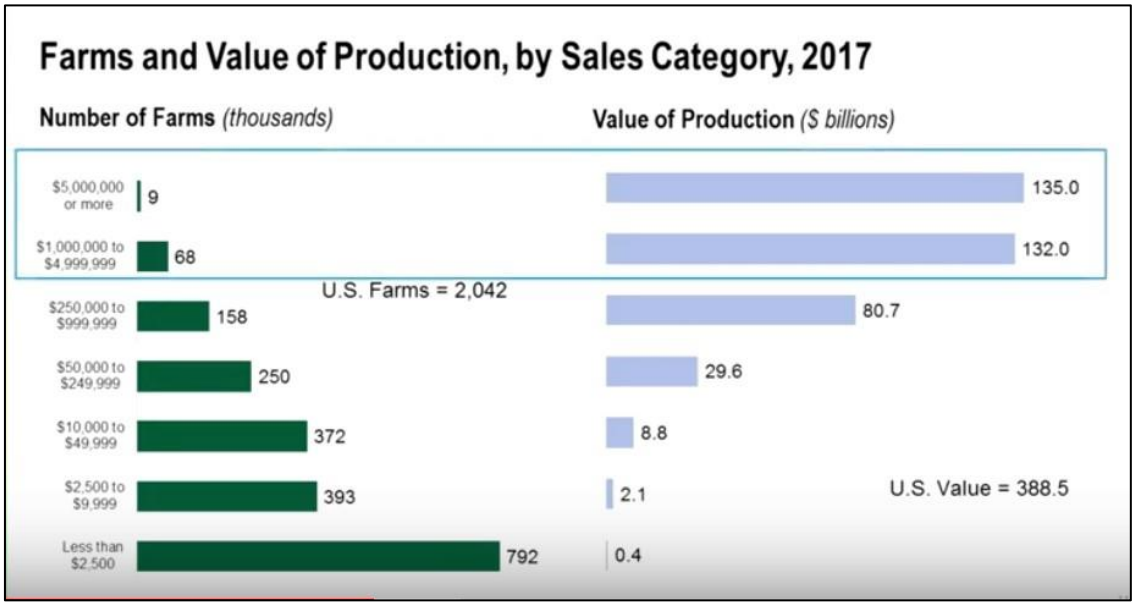
Top 10 States	2017
Texas	248,416
Missouri	95,320
Iowa	86,104
Oklahoma	78,531
Ohio	77,805
Kentucky	75,966
Illinois	72,651
California	70,521
Tennessee	69,983
Minnesota	68,822

Source: USDA NASS, 2017 Census of Agriculture
www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Ag_Census_Web_Maps/Overview/

Farm Size

Nationally, the Agriculture Of The Middle (AOTM) continues to disappear as we see increases in both small farms (1-29 acres) and large farms (500+ acres) and a decrease in the number of farms between 30 and 500 acres. This bifurcation in farm size occurs as farms consolidate with more sales volume coming from a smaller number of (large) farms. The value of farm production from the largest farms (more than $1 million in production value) increased from 41 percent of all sales in 2012 to almost 70 percent of sales in 2017.

Less than 4 percent of all farms in the U.S. are responsible for approximately 70 percent of the production value.



Source: USDA NASS, 2017 Census of Agriculture
www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017

In Ohio, 91 percent of farms are 499 acres or less and the value of products sold decreased 10 percent since 2012. Also, during that period the amount of ***government payments received by Ohio farmers increased by 86 percent***.

Farmland Tenure

There are 2,300 more farms in Ohio since the previous census, and the number of farms under full ownership of the operator increased by 7 percent. The number of farmers leasing land has decreased since 2012, and ***the amount of leased land in farming has gone down by almost 165,000 acres***.

The changes suggest that more farmers own the ground they farm, although the decrease in leased farmland could be due to land conversion to non-farm uses. The American Farmland Trust cites a national loss of approximately 3 acres of farmland per minute.

Local and Regional Marketing

The value of ***food sold directly to consumers increased dramatically between 2012 and 2017 as sales went from approximately $46 million to almost $80 million***. This occurred despite a decades-long challenge of limited processing and distribution infrastructure at the local and regional level.

The number of custom meat processors in the state has declined for decades and is currently critically limited.

Organic Agriculture

Nationally, organic farms remain a small percentage of overall farm numbers, but they continued to increase from 14,326 in 2012 to more than 18,000 in 2017. ***The number of farmers seeking organic certification increased by almost 40 percent in this five-year period and the average value of sales per farm increased 84 percent.***

Ohio is sixth in the nation in the number of certified organic farms and second in the nation in the number of acres being transitioned to organic production. States such as Pennsylvania (fourth nationally in the number of organic farms) are making strong investments to grow the organic sector by investing more than $24 million to grow opportunities in local and organic food systems with an eye toward becoming a national leader in organic agriculture.

The number of organic farms in Ohio continues to rise bringing with it the potential for increased job creation and ecosystem benefits.

Anecdotal information from OEFFA suggest that Ohio's organic meat industry would expand if the state had more than one meat processing plant certified for organic meat products. ***Analysis and Recommendations***

Farm Concentration: Size and Intensity

Building on statistics of farm size and value of production, Ohio's historical data is instructive.

LEADING STATES, NUMBER OF ORGANIC FARMS

California	3335
Wisconsin	1537
New York	1330
Pennsylvania	1048
Washington	824
Ohio	773
Iowa	676
Michigan	646
Minnesota	639
Vermont	639

Ohio Farm Numbers by Farm Size (1997-2017)

Farm Operations by Acreage	**2017**	**2012**	**2007**	**2002**	**1997**
1-9.9	10,333	6,796	7,767	7,471	7,023
10-49.9	26,533	24,220	24,361	23,261	20,069
50 to 179	**23,671**	**26,890**	**25,809**	**27,427**	**30,291**
180-499	**10,574**	**11,291**	**11,190**	**12,615**	**14,478**
500-999	**3,955**	**3,674**	**4,020**	**4,309**	**4,569**
1,000 or more	2,739	2,591	2,714	2,714	

* ***The number of Ohio farms that range in size from 50-999 acres decreased over the past 20 years.***

The table above illustrates the disappearing AOTM referred to by Fred Kirschenmann from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in 2003, when he first warned about the loss of mid-sized farms. Sixteen years later, we see those trends solidified.

A historical analysis of the same 20-year period illustrates that the number of cattle and hog operations have decreased in number while the number of animals per farm has increased.

From 1997 to 2017, the number of Ohio cattle operations decreased by more than 10,000 farms while the number of animals per farm has remained relatively steady or increased. The number of hog operations went from 6,637 in 1997 to 3,484 in 2017. During that 20-year span, the number of hogs went from approximately 3.5 million to almost 9.2 million.

In grain production, the number of corn operations went from almost 33,000 in 1997 to a little more than 21,000 in 2017, although corn production increased. Soybean farms, acreage in production, and bushels produced are all on the rise.

The question of whether this represents success or inevitability in production efficiency is certainly not a forgone conclusion, especially when the full costs of production are rarely taken into consideration. Ohio continues to struggle with water quality problems, including (and most devastatingly) persistent algal blooms. The state has and will continue to invest tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to address the problem.

The prevailing assumption of most policymakers is that bigger and fewer farmers achieving higher yields with new technologies, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetic engineering, is the only solution to feed the world. It is worth critical analysis as to whether this assumption is correct and whether the approach is justified given concerns related to family farm viability, the environment, rural communities, and public health.

There is much good news for Ohio agriculture and our agricultural future, however

Beginning and Organic Farmers

With more farm operations and Ohio sixth in the nation in the number of beginning farmers, we have an opportunity to invest in next generation farms and reap the benefits they provide related to community and economic development. Land values in Ohio went from approximately $2,000 per acre to almost

$6,200 per acre between 1997 and 2017. Access to land remains the biggest barrier that beginning farmers face while aging farmers often lack resources for succession planning. To proactively facilitate farming for the future Ohio can:

- Provide tax incentives for landowners who transfer land and farm assets to beginning farmers;
- Increase resources for farm succession planning; and
- Continue funding the Ohio Local Agricultural Easement Purchase Program.

Ohio is also sixth in the nation in the number of organic farms, and while Ohio's position in the top 10 list of states with organic farmers continues to rise without a formal state commitment, now is the time to invest in this important growth sector for agriculture, one that contributes ecosystem benefits in the form of clean water, nutrient dense foods, wildlife habitat and increased wealth to local communities. Conclusive research on "organic hot spots" conducted by Penn State now links economic health at the county level to organic agriculture and shows that organic food and crop production–and the business activities it creates real and long-lasting regional economic opportunities.

The oft-heard claims that the difference in yields between organic and conventional is drastic, or that organic cannot yield as much as conventional are not true. In fact, long-term studies by the Rodale Institute found organic outperforms conventional in adverse weather conditions like drought or flooding by as much as 40 percent. Organic methods can produce competitive yields in good weather too, all the while using less energy and generating fewer emissions, revitalizing the soil and sequestering carbon. As the climate crisis grows, our food and agricultural systems need to be resilient and regenerative—something that organic production systems can deliver. Taking a cue from other states, Ohio can invest in agricultural practices that pay ecosystem dividends by:

- Providing resources to farmers interested in transitioning to organic;
- Investing in research, education, and Extension services for organic production systems; and
- Coordinating inter-agency information-sharing and cooperation to better serve organic producers.

Local and Regional Food Systems

Given the dramatic growth in direct marketing of agricultural products in Ohio, small investments would pay large dividends in farm viability and community economic development.

Many groups, from the former Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council to the recent Ohio Smart Agriculture report, have lamented the lack of processing and distribution infrastructure to support local and regional food system growth in Ohio. For decades, food and farm stakeholders have been waiting for state investment in this critical infrastructure, to no avail. We currently have one meat processing facility in the state that is certified organic and many beef producers ready to certify if they had access to a meat processing facility.

The Ohio Farm to School Taskforce has identified a need for regional fruit and vegetable processing and flash freezing infrastructure to enable producers to sell into Ohio schools, provide healthful food to children and create new markets for Ohio producers.

Now is the time for ***increased investments in processing and distribution infrastructure within Ohio to further increase the value of direct marketed foods, create food and agriculture sector jobs, and increase farm viability.***

The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association is a membership organization comprised of farmers, gardeners, retailers, educators, researchers, and others who share a desire to build a healthy food system that brings prosperity to family farmers, meets the growing demand for local food, creates economic opportunities for our rural communities, and safeguards the environment.

For 40 years, OEFFA has provided education and advocacy to promote local and organic food systems, helping farmers and eaters reconnect and together build a sustainable food system.

Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association
41 Croswell Road
Columbus, Ohio 43214 (614)
421-2022
www.oeffa.org
