



Farmland Consolidation

Brief #2: Census of Agriculture Project

August 2026

Introduction

Farmland consolidation is the process of aggregating agricultural land from multiple smaller farms into fewer, larger farms. This trend is driven in part by technological advancements, economies of scale, and governmental policies.^{1,2}

Farmland consolidation is often viewed as a way to modernize agriculture, but it can also negatively impact rural communities¹ and biodiversity,³ ultimately threatening local ecosystems and the people who rely on them.^{1,4} It can also make it harder for new farmers to access land and for smaller farms to stay competitive.^{5,6}

This brief uses data from the Census of Agriculture to explore trends in United States farmland consolidation, examines the implications, and introduces policies aimed at addressing the public health, ecological, and economic consequences of these trends.



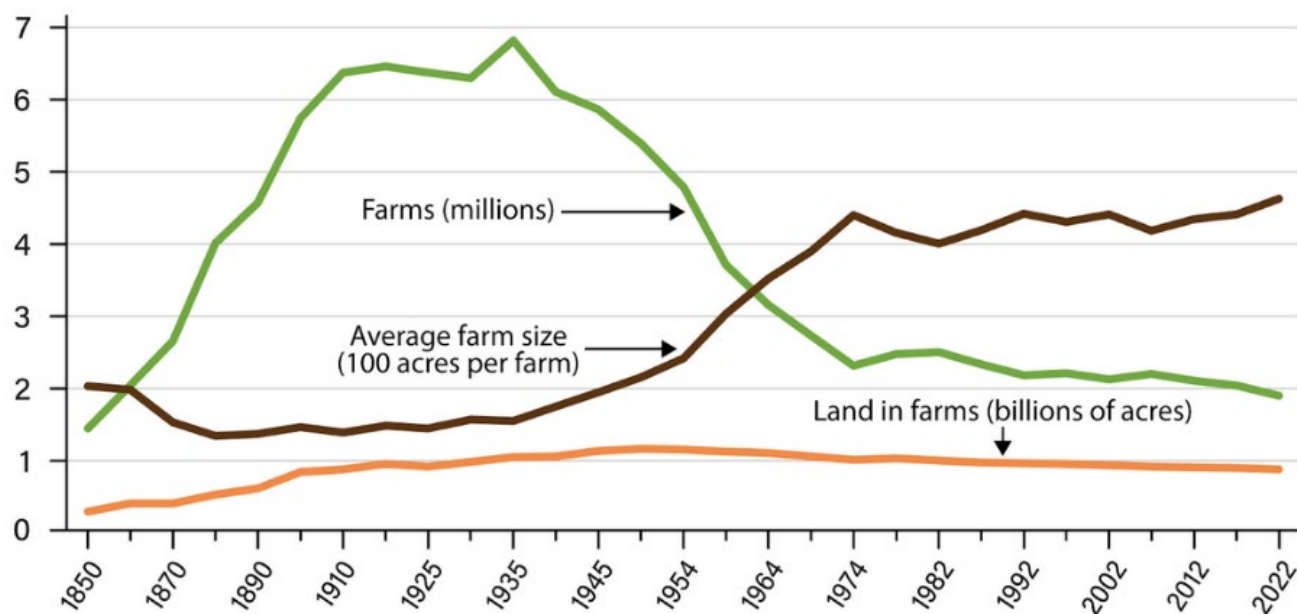
Trends

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the [results of the 2022 Census of Agriculture](#) in February 2024. The results provide both a view of the current state of agriculture in the U.S. and insights into short and long-term trends. Census data show that the decades-long trend toward farmland consolidation continues apace. As the figure below shows, the number of farms and acreage of land in farms have declined over time while the average farm size has been increasing.

Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850-2022



Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

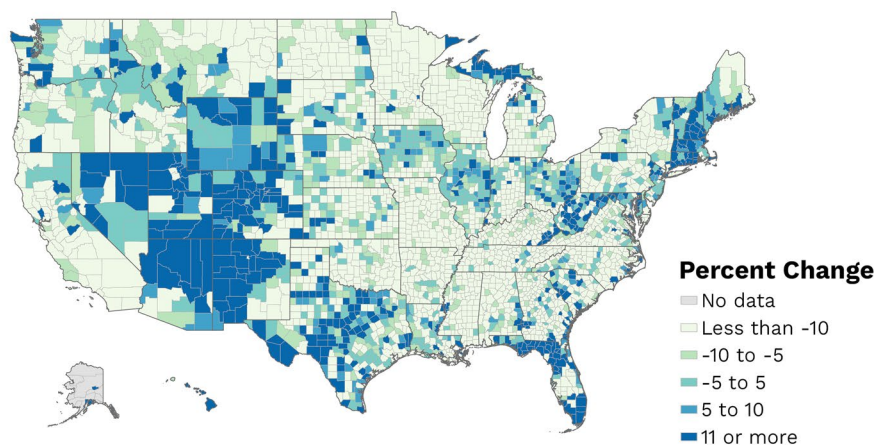


Farms

In 2022, there were 1.9 million farms in the U.S., 7% fewer than in 2017 (the last time the Census of Agriculture was conducted), representing a loss of roughly 142,000 farms in five years. Over the past 20 years the number of U.S. farms declined by 10% percent, representing a loss of 228,495 farms.

The decline in the number of farms, however, has not been uniform across the country. The following map shows that while the majority of the country lost farms, some areas experienced an increase in the number of farms, with the biggest growth occurring in the Southwest and Northeast.

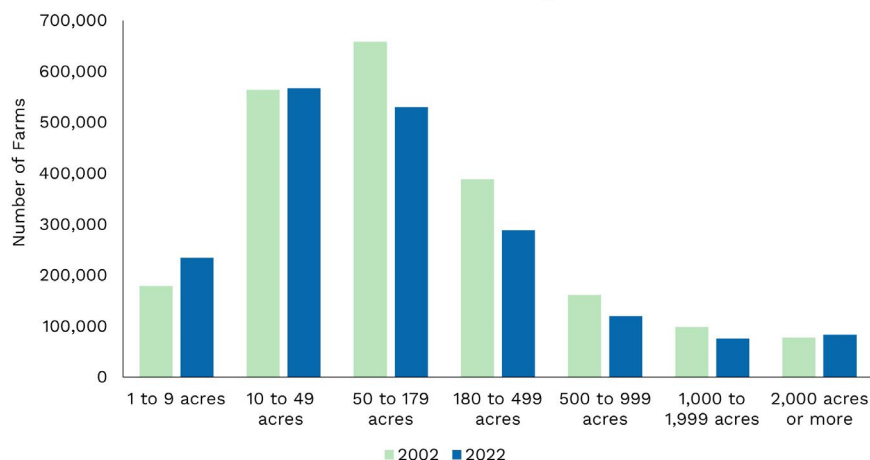
Percent Change in Number of Farms by County 2002-2022



The growth in the number of farms in the Southwest and Northeast regions of the U.S. was driven primarily by increases in small farms, specifically those in the 1–9 acre and 10–49 acre size classes.

The majority of farms that were lost between 2002 and 2022 were mid-sized farms, with the steepest declines occurring in the number of farms in the 50–179 acre and 180–499 acre ranges.

Number of Active Farms by Size Class

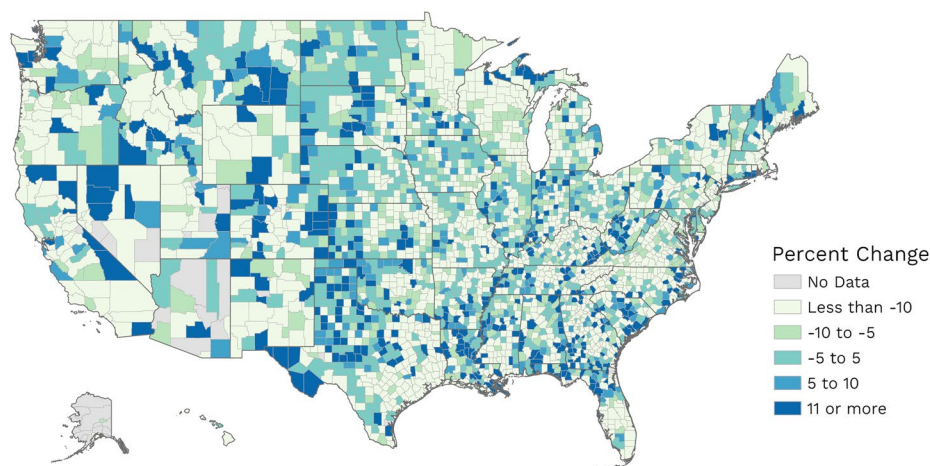


Land in Farms

There was a 2% decrease in total acres of U.S. land in farms between 2017 and 2022, equaling a loss of approximately 20 million acres of farmland.

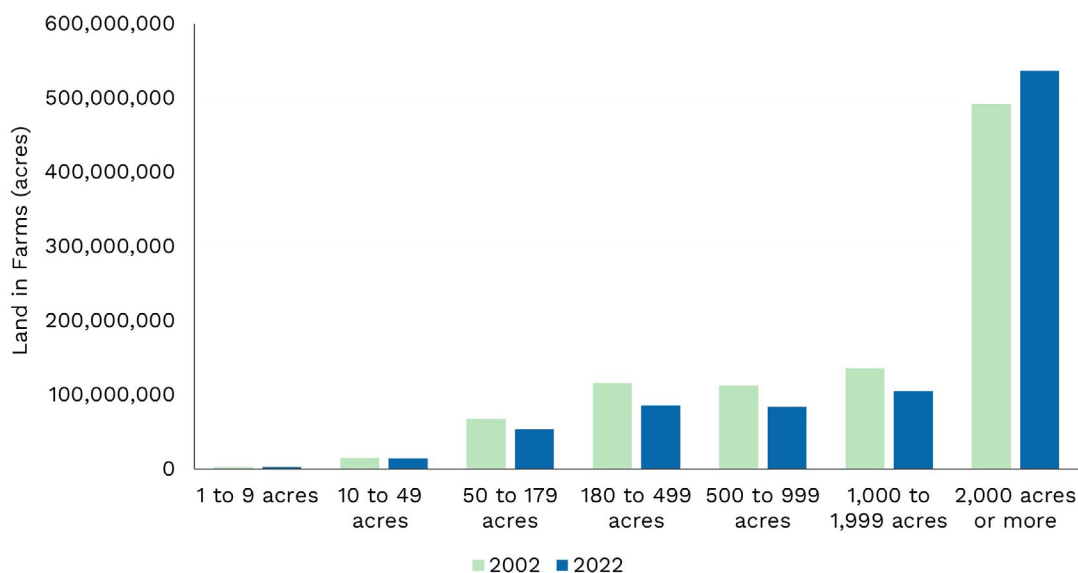
Between 2002 and 2022, there was a 6% decrease in total acres of land in farms, amounting to 60 million acres of farmland lost. The decline in farmland has been linked to factors such as urban development, climate change, energy production, and shifts in demographics and land ownership.⁷ The map below shows areas of growth and loss in land in farms in every state.

Percent Change in Acres of Farmland by County 2002-2022



The majority of U.S. farmland is operated by the largest farms. In 2022, 61% of farmland was in farms with 2,000 acres or more, up from 52% in 2002. The only gains made in land in farms between 2002 and 2022 were by the smallest and largest size classes. All other classes experienced losses.

Acres of Land in Farms by Size Class

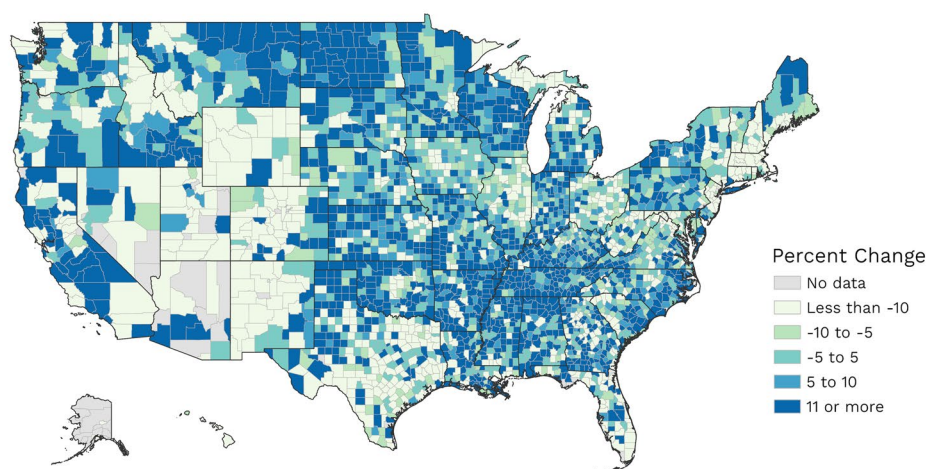


Average Farm Size

While the number of farms and the acreage of farmland continue to decline, the average farm size is on the rise. The average farm size increased by 5% between 2017 and 2022.

The change in average farm size between 2002 and 2022 follows a trend that is the reverse of the change in number of farms. The same areas that saw an increase in the number of farms, such as the Southwest and Northeast, also saw a decrease in average farm size. Meanwhile, areas that saw a decrease in the number of farms saw an increase in average farm size.

Percent Change in Average Farm Size by County 2002-2022



Implications

The ongoing consolidation of U.S. farmland, where fewer, larger farms replace many smaller ones, creates a mix of benefits and challenges. On one hand, it can make farming more efficient and profitable for some. On the other hand, it can harm small farmers, weaken rural communities, and affect the environment. These issues matter even more today, as farmers face the pressure to grow more food for a rising global population while also reducing their impact on climate change, pollution, and soil and water health.^{4,8}

Although globally, smaller farms often produce more food per acre than larger ones, the connection between farm size, profit, and productivity depends on location, markets, and access to technology.³ In the U.S., larger farms can often earn more because they can afford expensive machinery and equipment that save time and labor.^{2,9} They can buy supplies and services at lower prices per acre, and they have easier access to programs like crop insurance.¹ These advantages mean that large farms often make higher profits and get better returns on investment than mid-sized farms.^{2,9}

At the same time, consolidation makes it harder for small farms to compete in the agricultural market. As large farms buy up more land, farmland becomes more expensive, making it harder for new farmers to enter the market or for existing smaller operations to expand.^{5,6} Many government programs and financial supports, such as crop insurance, are also designed for large farms, making it

difficult for smaller or beginning farmers to qualify. As a result, smaller farms face greater financial risks and have fewer safety nets when markets or weather turn against them.^{6,7,10}

The shift toward larger farms also affects rural communities. Small and mid-sized farms have long been central to rural life, providing jobs, supporting local businesses, and building community connections. But as farmland consolidates, rural communities experience job losses and economic decline.^{11,12} Large farms use more automation and have fewer workers, leading many young people to move elsewhere for work.^{11,12} The decline of mid-sized farms, in particular, has been called the “hollowing out” of U.S. agriculture, with studies showing that communities with more mid-sized farms tend to have stronger economies, fairer income distribution, higher civic participation, and closer community ties.¹³

Consolidation also adversely affects biodiversity, with downstream implications for human health and welfare. Larger farms tend to grow only a few crops, such as corn or soybeans, or raise cattle,² while smaller farms often grow a mix of crops and are surrounded by forests or wetlands that support wildlife.³ These more varied landscapes help maintain soil health, clean water, and natural pest control. In contrast, large-scale monocultures, where a single crop is grown repeatedly, can degrade soil, reduce water quality, harm habitats, and make ecosystems more vulnerable to pests and diseases.⁴

As the trend of US farmland consolidation continues, thoughtful policies are needed to support small and mid-sized farmers while also protecting the environmental benefits provided by biodiverse landscapes. The challenge is to ensure that short-term gains in efficiency do not come at the expense of rural communities and the land and ecosystems that sustain them.

Policy Proposals

The Farm Bill, a crucial piece of legislation typically considered every five years, sets the nation’s agriculture and food policy, influencing public health, food systems, and agricultural practices across the country. That legislation provides a critical opportunity to address farmland conservation, farm loss, and agricultural sustainability. However, the Farm Bill is not the only opportunity to make change—progress can also be achieved in other ways, including by passing separate federal legislation, leveraging USDA authorities, and implementing state and local policies.

The first brief in this series introduced the four principles of the [CLF Public Health Agenda for Food Systems Change](#). Three of these principles are used below to illustrate proposed policy solutions that address issues discussed in this brief.

- Promote transitions to food production methods that support the health of people and the planet
- Protect food system workers and communities most affected by food production practices
- Expand transparency around food system practices and their impacts

See the next page for a few examples of proposals to address the problems discussed in this brief. This list is not exhaustive and is mostly focused on the federal level.

PROMOTE TRANSITIONS TO FOOD PRODUCTION METHODS THAT SUPPORT THE HEALTH OF PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

The existing U.S. agricultural subsidy structure disproportionately benefits large, high-income farms at the expense of small and mid-sized farms. Introducing income caps for eligibility and better targeting of insurance subsidies would help protect the livelihoods of small, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers.^{14,15}

Examples of proposals to support small and mid-sized farms:

- [Assisting Family Farmers through Insurance Reform Measures \(AFFIRM\) Act](#)
 - Legislation that would reform the federal crop insurance program to reduce spending and make crop insurance more accessible and affordable, particularly for smaller farms.
- [Insuring Fairness for Family Farmers Act](#)
 - Legislation that would reform federal crop insurance subsidies and incentivize crop insurance agents to cover small and specialty crop farms.
- [Save Our Small \(SOS\) Farms Act](#)
 - Legislation that would increase the number of farms eligible for crop insurance, reduce coverage costs for small farmers, and instruct the USDA to create more flexible insurance options to assist farmers during extreme weather events.
- [Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program Improvement Act](#)
 - Legislation that would expand access to the Whole Farm Revenue Protection program, particularly to small and diversified farms, providing a safety net that can help them better weather economic and environmental challenges.

Increased consolidation continues to strip small, beginning, and socially disadvantaged producers of market access and opportunities. Restricting corporate investors from owning or leasing future farmland and expanding infrastructure to help smaller, independent producers access markets can help ensure fair competition against industrial agribusinesses.¹⁵ Another important opportunity is leveraging the purchasing power of public institutions via values-aligned food procurement policies.¹⁶ Such policies seek to promote more just, healthy, resilient, and sustainable food systems by prioritizing these core values in food purchasing and food service operations.¹⁷

Examples of proposals to improve market access and opportunities at the federal and state level include:

- Federal
 - [Capital for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Act](#)
 - Legislation that would create a multi-year loan pilot program to assist beginning farmers and ranchers.
 - [Next Generation Farmer Act](#)
 - Legislation that would expand access to USDA Farm Ownership Loans for beginning farmers.
 - [Agriculture Skills Preparation for Industry Recruitment Efforts \(ASPIRE\) Act](#)
 - Legislation that would establish an agriculture workforce training program within USDA's existing Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, support schools in strengthening workforce training and retention, and support apprenticeships, internships, and partnerships with local agriculture businesses.

- [EAT Local Foods Act](#)
 - Legislation that would create a permanent grant program for state and tribal governments to procure and distribute locally grown food.
- [EFFECTIVE Food Procurement Act](#)
 - Legislation that would require the USDA to set targets for purchasing sustainable and equitably sourced products and would set aside funding for a pilot program to create a values-aligned purchasing process, enhancing market access for small-scale and underserved producers.
- [Local Farmers Feeding Our Communities Act](#)
 - Legislation that seeks to boost local procurement through cooperative agreements connecting local farmers and producers with local food distribution organizations. The act would set aside funding for purchases from small, mid-size, beginning, and veteran farmers.
- [Strengthening Local Food Security Act](#)
 - Legislation that seeks to increase local and regional procurement for food banks and schools, with a focus on small, beginning, and underserved farmers, ranchers, and fishers.
- [Local Procurement Act](#)
 - Legislation that seeks to boost USDA's local and domestically grown food purchasing and increase marketing opportunities for small and mid-sized farms.
- [Farmland for Farmers Act](#)
 - Legislation that would restrict corporate farmland investment and consolidation, increase transparency in land ownership, and ensure fair access to farm programs.
- [Fair Credit for Farmers Act](#)
 - Legislation that seeks to improve access to credit for farmers and addresses disparities in lending practices.
- [Increasing Land Access, Security and Opportunities Act](#)
 - This bill aims to expand access to land, markets, and capital for small, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers.
 - (RELATED UPDATE): USDA terminated the Increasing Land, Capital, and Market Access (ILCMA) program in March 2026, canceling \$300 million in contracts. USDA stated that many of the program's projects did not effectively improve land access and cited concerns over spending and equity-related criteria.
- [Justice for Black Farmers Act](#)
 - This legislation aims to end discrimination in federal agriculture policies that have contributed to the loss of land, limited access to resources, and unfair treatment of Black farmers.
- [Office of Small Farms Establishment Act](#)
 - This legislation would create an Office of Small Farms at the USDA, which would focus on the needs and challenges of small farms and ensure they remain competitive and sustainable.
- [Empowering Women in Agriculture Act](#)
 - Legislation that would include women in the definition of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and enhance access to funding, resources, and opportunities for organizations serving disadvantaged farmers.

- State
 - Illinois:
 - [Farmer Equity/Innovation Act](#)
 - Legislation that would create a Farmer Equity and Innovation Center at the University of Illinois, establishing a statewide program to support small and mid-sized farms.
 - [Food Infrastructure Grant Act](#)
 - Enacted legislation that requires the Department of Agriculture to create and manage a Local Food Infrastructure Grant Program to enhance local food processing, aggregation, and distribution through the award of annual grants.
 - [Small Farmers Restoration Program](#)
 - Legislation that would establish a program to support socially disadvantaged and limited-resource farmers by providing grants for agricultural conservation easements, technical assistance, and training.
 - New York
 - [Good Food New York Act](#)
 - Legislation that would allow food purchasing contracts to be awarded to qualified bidders who meet specific values-based standards, provided their bid is not 10% higher than the lowest bid.
 - Hawaii
 - [Hawaii Right to Farm Act](#)
 - Legislation that would redefine which agricultural actors qualify for right-to-farm protections, explicitly excluding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and businesses with opaque ownership. It would also protect Native Hawaiian subsistence farmers from nuisance claims and require corporate or limited-liability farm entities to publicly disclose their ownership and management structures.
 - California
 - [Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Act](#)
 - Legislation that would establish a program for financial and technical assistance for agricultural land acquisition and protection. Priority funding will be directed toward activities that benefit socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, particularly those operating on smaller farms or ranches.

PROTECT FOOD SYSTEM WORKERS AND COMMUNITIES MOST AFFECTED BY FOOD PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Consolidation in agriculture also impacts workers in the food system and the communities where production takes place. Many farmworkers are not protected by existing labor and occupational safety standards, and lax enforcement fails to protect many other workers in the food system. The widespread reliance of undocumented workers throughout the food system creates more opportunities for exploitation and dangerous conditions for workers who do not feel empowered to report violations for fear of immigration enforcement. There are many changes needed to address impacts on workers in the food system, ranging from policies on overtime and minimum wage issues, child labor rules, heat protection, occupational safety and ergonomic issues, pesticide exposure, and labor contracting.

Examples of proposals to strengthen protections for workers in the food system include:

- Federal
 - [Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness, Injury, and Fatality Prevention Act](#)
 - Legislation designed to protect workers, particularly those in outdoor agricultural and construction industries, from heat-related illnesses, injuries, and fatalities.
 - [Protect America's Children from Toxic Pesticides Act](#)
 - Legislation that aims to strengthen protections against harmful pesticides, particularly those that pose a risk to the health of children, workers, and the environment.
 - [Pesticide Injury Accountability Act](#)
 - Legislation that would ensure that pesticide manufacturers can be held responsible for the harms caused by their products.
 - [Protect Our Farmers and Families Act](#)
 - Legislation that would cancel the registration and prohibit all uses of the pesticide diquat in the United States.
 - [Industrial Agriculture Accountability Act](#)
 - Legislation that aims to strengthen protections for farm workers, including ending high-speed slaughter systems.
 - [Child Labor Exploitation Accountability Act](#)
 - Legislation designed to ensure businesses, including the agricultural sector, protect children's rights and promote ethical labor practices.
- State
 - California
 - [Virtual Health Hub for Rural Communities Pilot Program](#)
 - Enacted legislation that establishes a program to enhance access to health services for farmworkers in rural California.
 - Nebraska
 - [Meat and Poultry Workers and Contractors Protection Act](#)
 - Legislation that seeks to enhance protections for meat and poultry workers, particularly for bird flu.

- Pennsylvania
 - Meat Packing and Food Processing Protection Act
 - Legislation that would improve health and safety standards in Pennsylvania's meatpacking and food processing sectors by establishing workplace safety committees, appointing a workers' rights coordinator, and providing public health emergency protections, and enforcing penalties for non-compliance.

EXPAND TRANSPARENCY AROUND FOOD SYSTEM PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPACTS

The concentration of market power in the hands of a few large firms has allowed them to dominate agricultural markets and limit transparency in their actions. Proposals to address market power and promote fairness in agricultural markets include updating federal antitrust laws to prevent mergers or acquisitions that concentrate excessive market power in single firms.¹⁸ Additional proposals to increase transparency include reforms to the distribution of federal crop insurance subsidies¹⁵ and checkoff programs.¹⁹

Examples of proposals to increase market fairness and access to information:

- Family Grocery and Farmer Relief Act
 - Legislation that would reduce concentration in the meatpacking industry by prohibiting major meatpacking companies from controlling more than one major category of meat production, enforcing divestiture plans, addressing pricing practices affecting independent grocers, and providing financial assistance and technical support to farmer cooperatives and small businesses seeking to acquire or operate meatpacking facilities.
- Livestock Consolidation Research Act
 - Legislation that would support research into consolidation and concentration in the livestock industry, and its effects on farmers, ranchers, and consumers.
- American Beef Labeling Act
 - Legislation aimed at requiring more transparent labeling of beef products sold in the U.S.
- Crop Insurance Transparency Act
 - Legislation that would require the USDA to provide more detailed information on the costs, payouts, and financial arrangements of the Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP).
- Opportunities for Fairness in Farming (OFF) Act
 - Legislation that would increase transparency in USDA's checkoff programs and prevent funds from being used by groups that lobby on agricultural policy.
- USDA Efforts to Promote Fair and Competitive Markets and Enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act
 - In 2024 and 2025, the USDA finalized several rules aimed at assuring fair competition and fair-trade practices for livestock farmers and protecting the agricultural system from monopolistic practices.
 - (RELATED UPDATE): The USDA proposed delaying implementation of the Poultry Grower Payment Systems and Capital Improvement Systems final rule until December 2027. The rule, originally set to take effect in July 2026, was part of a broader effort to enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act and would require greater transparency around required capital investments and restrict compensation systems that rank farmers against one another.

What's Next?

Long-term trends indicate that agriculture in general in the U.S. is consolidating into larger, fewer farms. Animal agriculture has followed a similar trend and has seen a shift toward larger operations. As the operations have become larger, they have increased the number of animals they produce. The next brief in this series focuses on this trend, discussing its potential impacts on public and environmental health, and highlighting policies that could help change it.

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