



INTRODUCTION

Brief#1: Census of Agriculture Project

August 2026

What is the Census of Agriculture?

The [Census of Agriculture](#) is a comprehensive survey of United States farming that has delivered uniform, impartial data for every county in the nation since 1840.^{1,2} Although originally intertwined with the population census, it has since evolved into a survey that is conducted every five years. The survey focuses on operations that produce or sell at least \$1,000 worth of agricultural products and examines land ownership, operator traits, production practices, income, expenditures, and much more.^{3,4}

The Census of Agriculture is an important tool for gaining insight into the current state of U.S. agriculture and monitoring trends over time. It provides essential data that help farmers and ranchers make informed decisions about the future of their own operations. It is also used by policymakers, government agencies, and local authorities to develop policies and programs and allocate resources aimed at improving the health, growth, and competitiveness of rural communities and U.S. agriculture.²

However, the Census of Agriculture is not without limitations, and concerns have been raised about how it defines and counts farms and farmers. For instance, including lifestyle and residential farms alongside full-time commercial operations can inflate overall farm numbers and mask the scale of consolidation within the sector.⁵ The Census of Agriculture also provides limited insight into farmworkers, as it focuses primarily on farm operators; the labor data it does collect is reported by operators rather than by farmworkers themselves, which can obscure the experiences and working conditions of agricultural labor.⁵ In addition, it does not consistently capture sufficient detail on beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, groups that could benefit most from targeted federal policies, safety nets, and technical support.⁵ Declining response rates have also raised concerns about data quality, with survey participation falling from 72% in 2017 to 61% in 2022.⁶ Despite these gaps, the Census remains one of the most valuable tools for understanding broad, long-term trends in U.S. agriculture.

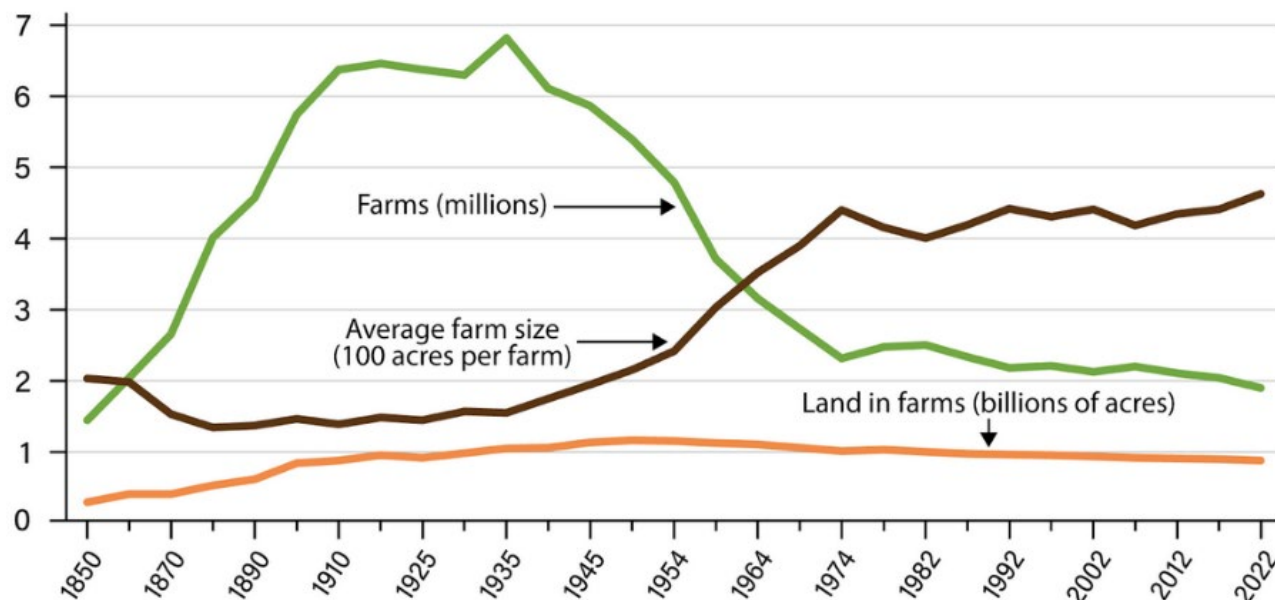
Key Findings from the 2022 Census of Agriculture

When the results of the latest Census were released in February 2024, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack called the survey “a wake-up call,” as the number of farms in the U.S. had decreased by 7% since the 2017 Census, a loss of approximately 142,000 farms in five years. The results also showed a 2% decrease in total acres of land in farms, a loss of approximately 20,000,000 acres of farmland.⁷

As the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service reports, these declines in farms and farmland are part of a longer-term trend.⁸ Still, the most recent Census indicates some concerning milestones. The number of farms fell below 2 million for the first time in over 150 years, and the amount of land in farms fell below 900,000,000 acres for the first time in roughly a century.

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

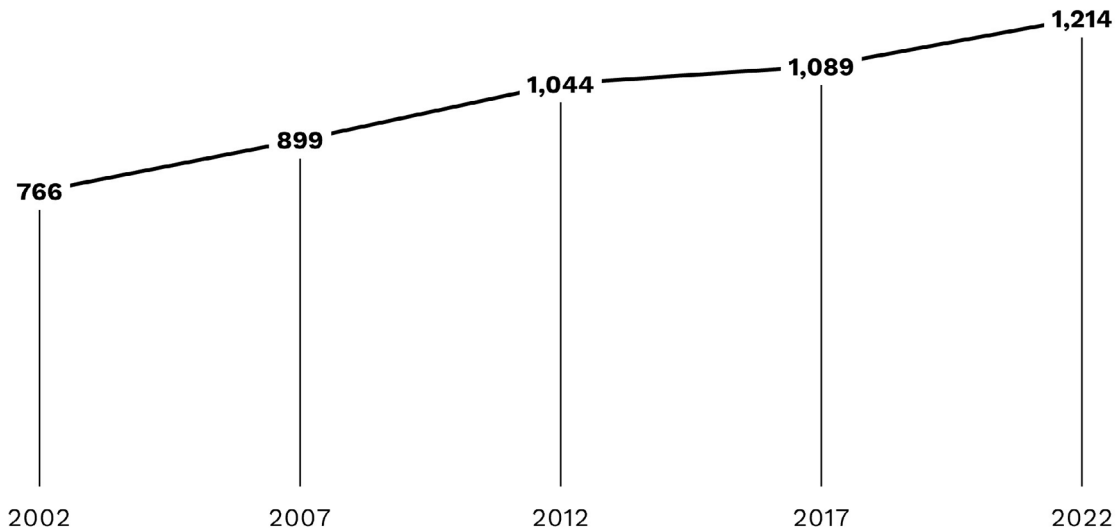
USDA Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



While we have seen a striking decline in farms and land in farms, the average farm size in the U.S. has been increasing over time. Since 2017, the average farm size increased by 5% to 463 acres. This trend toward larger, fewer farms, known as farmland consolidation, has been linked to several negative consequences. It creates barriers for new farmers, undermines the historical foundation of rural economies, and drives the depopulation of rural communities.⁹ Farm size growth is also associated with landscape simplification, in which large-scale monocultures require more fertilizers and pesticides, degrading soil health and increasing vulnerability to erosion and climate impacts.¹⁰

Inventory numbers from the 2022 Census show a similar trend for livestock and poultry farms. The average number of animals being raised per farm continues to increase over time. The inventory of hogs and pigs, for example, increased by 2% and the number of farms with inventory decreased by 8% between 2017 and 2022. But the average inventory per farm increased by 11%, continuing an upward trend over the past two decades.

Average Inventory of Hogs and Pigs per Farm



This trend toward raising more animals per farm has consequences as well. As the landmark report *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America* states, the move towards large, intensive operations where animals are housed in large numbers has come at a cost to the environment and had negative impacts on public health, rural communities, and the health and well-being of the animals.¹¹



The Census of Agriculture Project

After announcing that the 2022 Census of Agriculture results were a “wake-up call,” Secretary Vilsack asked, “whether as a country we are okay with losing that many farms and okay with losing that much farmland? Or is there a better way?”

Through the Census of Agriculture Project, the [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](#) (CLF) aims to answer that question with a series of briefs that provide insights into initiatives and policies that imagine a better way.

In 2002, the CLF published an article titled “How Sustainable Agriculture Can Address the Environmental and Human Health Harms of Industrial Agriculture,”¹² which highlighted many problems with mainstream farming models, including:

- Pollution from large, intensive agricultural operations is harming the health of both workers and residents living downstream or downwind from these operations.
- Synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers are polluting soil, water, and air, harming both the environment and human health.
- Soil is eroding much faster than it can be replenished, taking with it the land’s fertility and nutrients that nourish both plants and those who eat them.

Twenty years later, the 2022 Census results indicate that this agricultural model has only become more entrenched. More recent estimates from the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggest that the trends identified in the Census, including fewer farms, less farmland, and larger average farm size, have persisted.¹³ The simple answer to Secretary Vilsack’s question, therefore, is yes—there must be a better way.

While many of the impacts that mainstream farming models have on climate, health, and the environment are better recognized now, there is still significant work to be done to shift toward a model that increases long-term production and profitability while also promoting environmental stewardship and enhancing the quality of life for farmers and rural communities. The series of briefs in this project will use data from the Census of Agriculture to help us better understand different trends in U.S. agriculture and identify opportunities for protecting public health and the environment while also cultivating farmers’ livelihoods and rural economies.

Through this series, we aim to examine initiatives and policies that can mitigate the health and environmental impacts of extractive agricultural production and create positive outcomes for agricultural communities. We will also share policy proposals that align with the four principles that comprise the [CLF Public Health Agenda for Food Systems Change](#):

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

What's Next?

The U.S. has experienced continued losses in both farms and land in farms. Over time, we have also seen a shift toward larger and fewer farms that prioritize mass production of livestock and poultry and a limited range of crops at the expense of public health and the environment. The next two briefs in this series provide a deeper examination of trends in farmland consolidation and geographic concentration in animal agriculture and their implications for public and environmental health. Each brief also introduces potential policy solutions.

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