

Who are the new farmers?

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Who are the new farmers in America? Where are they coming from? I have been asked these questions several times over the past few weeks by various reporters. First, I have to remind myself, the reporters are talking about the new farmers in the latest Census of Agriculture, not necessarily the new *sustainable* farmers. A recent USDA census report indicated a 4% increase in the number of farms in the U.S. between 2002 and 2007. After falling for several decades, the trend in farm numbers between 1992 and 2002 had been virtually flat. The reporters are wondering where the new farmers are coming from and if we are actually seeing a reversal in the long term toward fewer farms and farmers.

A closer examination of the census data does little to answer their questions. The largest increase in farm numbers, by far, was for farms with annual sales less than \$1,000. These are obviously hobby farmers – rural residents who sell a few of the things they enjoy producing. The USDA census definition of a farm is pretty broad and includes a lot of farms that most people would not view as a serious farming operation. Many of the new farms fall in this category. As more people are finding out, rural places can be very desirable places to live.

The census also showed significant increases in farms with annual sales of more than \$250,000. In fact, the largest percentage increases was for operations with sales over \$1,000,000. Obviously, most of the increases in these larger operations resulted from smaller farms growing into larger farms. It's generally not easy to start a new *large* farming operation these days. An obvious exception is large-scale confinement animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, where corporate contractors arrange for access to startup capital. Rapid growth in hog and dairy CAFOs probably helped boost annual average sales of new farms to \$73,000, even though 70% of new farmers reported sales of less than \$10,000. About 32% of new farmers reported farming as their principle occupation – most likely corporate contract farmers.

Farms with annual sales between \$10,000 and \$250,000 continued to decline in numbers – the disappearing middle of American agriculture. Many of these small and mid-sized farms make a significant contribution to the economic well-being of farm families, even if they are not full-time family-farms. In fact, farms with less than \$250,000 in sales make up well over half of all farmers who consider farming to be their “primary occupation,” even though larger operations account for more than 80% of total sales of farm products.

Farming isn't just about producing commodities for export or energy, or even producing food for American consumers. Farming is also about providing a desirable quality of life for farm families, which in most cases requires a significant contribution to family income. The disappearing middle of American agriculture reflects disappearing economic opportunities for America's farm families. Many farmers are never going to become larger farmers, no matter how smart they manage or hard they work. As farming operations grow larger, the opportunities for farmers inevitably grow fewer. There is a physical limit to how much people can eat and will buy. Farms can only be bigger if there are fewer of them. There is nothing in the 2007 Census of Agriculture to indicate a change in this historic reality.

Unfortunately, the USDA census figures do not tell the whole story. All the new farms are not residential/lifestyle farms, retirement farms, or limited-resource farms, and they are not large farms. Many of the new farms are small and mid-sized farms and they obviously are expected to provide a desirable quality of life and an acceptable level of income for the new farm families. Many of those on today's small and mid-sized farms don't want *bigger* farms; they want *better* farms – and their numbers are growing. These are the new American farms. *They are sustaining American agriculture by sustaining people through agriculture.*

The Census of U.S. Agriculture will never be able to tell us how many new sustainable farmers there are until the census takers start asking farmers why they farm. I have suggested that farmers farm for three basic different reasons: to make money, to care for the land, and to provide a quality way of life. Those who farm for money are *commercial* farmers, those who farm to care for the land are *stewardship* farmers, and those who farm for quality of life are *way of life* farmers (see Sept-Oct 2003 issue or Small Farm Today). Sustainable farmers farm for balance and harmony among all three. The new sustainable farmers understand that economically viability ultimately depends on ecological and social integrity.

The USDA implicitly assumes that farms should be commercial ventures by giving priority to the economic dimensions of farming. Their discussions of residential/lifestyle, retirement, and limited-resource farm are framed in terms of their *inability* to produce significant quantities of commodities for markets or profits for farmers, rather than their *ability* to contribute to a desirable quality of life.

We have no way of knowing how many of the new farmers are commercial farmers, stewardship farmers, way of life farmers, or sustainable farmers. We have no way of knowing how many of the mid-sized farms that have disappeared were commercial farms that succeeded by becoming larger or commercial farms that failed because they were too small. Or perhaps they were farms that were too large to be ecologically or socially sustainable, and thus became smaller.

Neither do we know how many of USDA's “non-commercial” farmers are actually in the process of becoming sustainable farms. Perhaps they are supplementing farm income from off-farm sources while they restore the ecological and economic integrity of “worn out” commercial farms. My personal experiences lead me to believe that many of the USDA's smaller “primary occupation” farms and “non-commercial” farms are actually sustainable farms in progress. Restoring sustainability to American agriculture will not be a quick or easy process, but it is happening.

In summary, I believe that many of USDA's new farmers are new sustainable farmers. I know who a significant number of them are and I know where they are coming from. You can find them at the hundreds of sustainable farming conferences and similar events that are held all across the continent each year. You can meet them at any of the nation's 4,700-plus farmers markets, with new markets springing up each year. Or you can find at least 12,500 of them (according to USDA) by joining a community supported agriculture organization, or CSA, where you can share in their season's bounty of locally grown foods.

These new sustainable farmers are more likely to be female than are conventional farmers. They are also more racially diverse, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. The latest USDA figures show increases in diversity for U.S. farmers in general, which tends to confirm the greater diversity of new farmers. The new sustainable farmers include people of all ages but generally are younger than conventional farmers. This also is consistent with USDA statistics showing that new farmers in general tend to be younger.

The census statistics tend to confirm my personal observations at agricultural conferences, farmers markets, CSAs, and elsewhere across the continent. The new American farmers are different – as are their customers. Not only do they look different, they think differently, and they have a different vision for the future of American agriculture.

These new sustainable farmers are quite literally coming from everywhere. An increasing number are immigrants, most of whom already know how to farm and have ready-made ethnic markets for their produce. However, immigrant farmers soon learn that the new American consumers are motivated by a quest for ecological and social integrity, as well as variety, freshness, or flavor.

The vast majority of the new American farmers are native born. Many are young people who have no experience or previous connection to farming. Most are well educated, but still willing to work hard for little pay in on-farm internship programs to learn the art, science, and practice of real farming. What they lack in experience they more than offset in energy, enthusiasm, and commitment.

Others are retired couples, many still in their 50s; who may or may not have grown up on a farm. They have saved up enough money during successful careers for at least a down payment on a small farm. They have decided to spend their “retirement” doing something they have always wanted to do. They may find their off-farm experience very useful in the business aspects of farming but have to learn the rest of farming from scratch.

A few new farmers even have conventional farming backgrounds. Some eventually come to the conclusion that the industrial paradigm of agriculture wasn't working, so they change paradigms in mid-stream. Others grew up on conventional farms but have decided that farming must change and they are going to help change it.

What makes me most hopeful for the future of American agriculture is the large number of very bright young people on college campuses all across the country that want to find careers in sustainable agriculture – including farming, marketing, finance, and policy. They may or may not have a background in agriculture but they understand the importance of agriculture to the future and they want to be a part of it.

Many of the new American farmers of the future will likely be coming from the top of their classes at some of the most prestigious academic institutions in American. In this, there is hope for the future.