

A Brief Overview of the Virginia Census of Agriculture 2007

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The 2007 Census of Agriculture was released by the USDA/National Agricultural Statistics Service on February 4, 2009. Although Census data provide only snapshots of years that may differ markedly by growing or market conditions, they nevertheless provide important comparisons of the Virginia agricultural economy condition.

The total number of Virginia farms in 2007 was 47,383, less than ½% lower than in 2002, but nearly 2,000 farms (4%) lower than in 1997. Despite the small decrease in number of Virginia farms, the agricultural land base declined by 6% from 2002 (down nearly 521 thousand acres, or on average approximately 104 thousand acres per year). Census of Agriculture data do not report the subsequent use of land previously in farms, but we can assume that a sizeable proportion of acres were lost to urbanization.

Total cropland on Virginia farms also declined significantly from 2002 to 2007. Cropland acres in 2007 were 3.27 million acres, down 920 thousand acres (nearly 22%) from 2002. However, it should be noted that harvested cropland acres were down only 3% from 2002 (less than 100 thousand acres), implying much less crop loss than during the poor 2002 year.

Although the value of crop sales was nearly 20% higher in 2007 than in 2002, the poor growing conditions in 2002 and high prices of 2007 do not clearly indicate greater crop farm profits in the most recent Census year. Livestock and poultry sales were 25% higher in 2007 than in 2002, but generally lower numbers of livestock and poultry sales indicates that 2007 prices were not typical of the period since 1997.

The average age of Virginia farm operators was 58.2 years in 2007, a sharp jump from 56.7 years in 2002 and 55.8 years in 1997. Overall, the average Virginia farmer is aging more rapidly than ever. The number of Virginia Farm Operators under 35 years old fell from 2195 in 2002 to only 1966 in 2007.

The number of Virginia beef cattle farms in 2007 fell 5% from 2002 to 21,907 farms. However, the number of beef cows in inventory increased by 2% to slightly over 695 thousand cows. The situation is decidedly bleaker for the Virginia dairy sector. Dairy farm numbers declined 27% from 2002 to 2007, and dairy farm numbers are 39% lower than in 1997. The 1,154 dairy farms reported in the 2007 Census had 98,917 dairy cows on hand, nearly 26 thousand fewer cows than in 1997.

Virginia farms reporting hogs sold in 2007 increased to 964 farms, up 130 farms from 2002. Hog and pig sales also increased to 965 thousand, up 14% from 2002.

Virginia poultry sales form a substantial portion of the Commonwealth's agricultural economy. The 2007 number of poultry farms was 672, down 21% from 2002. Poultry sales were down as well, but substantially less than the decline in number of farms (6%).

In response to higher prices and better growing conditions, 2007 Virginia harvested crop acres increased for several important field crops. Corn acres increased to 401,070 acres, up 19% from 2002. Harvested acres of soybeans increased modestly by 5% to 490,396 acres in 2007. Among small grain crops, wheat

acres increased by 14% to just over 200 thousand acres, and barley declined by 37% to less than 28 thousand acres. Cotton acres harvested in 2007 fell 36% to 59,243 acre, its lowest acreage since cotton's return to Virginia in the early 1990s. Peanut acres harvested fell 62% in 2007 to only 21,631 acres.

Among other important farm products, hay acres declined by 5% to 1.31 million acres, and land in orchards fell by 25% to only 19,713 acres.

The PDF and a beta version of the Census query engine can be found at <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>