

Sorting through the census



ANALYSIS

By **DON McCABE**

If you have trouble sleeping at night, go to the Web, pull up the 2007 Census of Agriculture and delve into some numbers. While you may nod off, there are some fascinating plums to pull off and digest about Nebraska and the nation's agriculture, findings that always interest ag statisticians, ag company marketers, ag policy experts or anyone else concerned about commodity trends or the changing structure of farms and ranches.

In the following review of Nebraska's census numbers, we looked online, visited with Joe Parsons and Dean Groskurth at the Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service, and scanned

At a glance

- Census compares 2007 farm statistics to those in 2002.
- Number of Nebraska farms drops by 3.3% from 2002.
- Average age of main operator was 55.9 years in 2007.

a "Nebraska State and County Data" publication, one that's only slightly smaller than the congressional stimulus bill.

In this analysis, we highlight several key Nebraska categories and compare some of them with 2002, the previous census year. The National Agricultural Statistics Service mailed surveys in 2008 to accumulate 2007 stats. Results were released early this year.

Context is important when comparing 2007 with 2002, says Parsons. "In 2002, it was very dry, so crop production and ag

sales were down significantly. So were commodity prices. It was a much better year in 2007 in most of the state, with better precipitation and stronger prices. But costs also were up significantly."

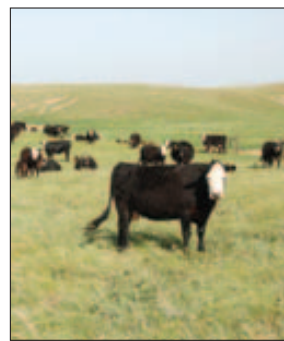
Here are some random selections of Nebraska stats from 2007, occasionally with a comparison to 2002.

Go online for census numbers at www.agcensus.usda.gov.

Farm and ranch structure

■ The number of Nebraska farms and ranches totaled 47,712, down 1,643 from 2002, a 3.3% drop.

■ Land in Nebraska farms and ranches totaled 45.5 million acres, down 1% from 2002. Average size of a Nebraska operation in 2007 increased to 953 acres, 23 more than five



BEEF STATE: In 2007, Nebraska sold 7.6 million cattle from 20,218 operations.

years earlier. Farms with 2,000 or more acres jumped from 4,864 in 2002 to 5,237 in 2007, while most other size categories declined, a sign of the big getting bigger. For instance, farms with 180 to 499 acres dropped

by 1,472; farms with 500 to 999 acres dropped by 1,332; and farms in the 1,000- to 1,999-acre group declined by 667.

■ Average age of the "principal operator" was 55.9 years vs. 53.9 in 2002. (In 1978, it was 48.6.) Fewer sons or daughters — or other younger farmers, for that matter — to take over is a perennial concern, although Parsons says that an interesting note is that today's farm automation does enable farmers in their 70s or older to stay on the farm without onerous physical activity.

■ By types of organization, the family or individual held 39,848, or 84%, of the 47,712 farms. Partnerships accounted for 3,616 farms, and corporations operated 3,571 farms. The latter number included family farm corporations.

■ Full owners held 23,989



FLOW TO THE TOP: According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, Nebraska's 8,558,559 irrigated acres surpassed California's 8,016,159 acres.

Census: Nebraska attains No. 1 in irrigation

ACCORDING to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, Nebraska has moved past California as the state with the most irrigated acres.

The census shows the Cornhusker state with 8,558,559 acres under irrigation vs. 7,625,170 in 2002.

Based on the 2007 census results, California had 8,016,159 acres of irrigated land, a drop of nearly 700,000 from 2002.

Nebraska gained more than 900,000 acres in those five years, based on the census figures, even with

mounting regulatory pressure from the state and natural resources districts in some regions. In fact, on a national map of irrigated land changes, 2002 to 2007, parts of southwest and south-central Nebraska lost irrigated acreage, due in part to irrigation retirement programs associated with the Republican River conflict.

New wells drilled

At the same time, big chunks of eastern, northeast and central Nebraska and areas along the Platte River showed increases in irrigation, practically all of it

from wells, and much of that increase is attributed to new wells drilled in anticipation of future groundwater moratoriums.

Johnson says that Holt, Lincoln and Custer counties each showed gains of at least 100,000 acres.

"The good news is we're No. 1," he adds. "The less than good news is that we'll really have to care for our water resources. We need solid policy in place to accomplish that. We need to operate in the best interests of everyone in Nebraska."