



Beginning Farmers

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Characteristics of Farmers by Years on Current Farm

25 percent . . .

. . . of 2.1 million U.S. farmers in 2012 were beginning farmers.

Understanding the Numbers

* = statistically significant change

The 2012 Census of Agriculture contains a measure of relative reliability (the coefficient of variation) for every data item published. This Highlights document does not include these numbers, but shows through an asterisk (*) every number that is a statistically significant change from the 2007 Census to the 2012 Census (defined as two or more standard errors).

To learn more about statistical significance and Census methodology, go to the frequently asked questions at www.agcensus.usda.gov.

In 2012, the United States had 522,058 beginning farmers (principal operators who were on their current operation ten years or less). This was 20 percent fewer than in 2007, when the last agriculture census was conducted. Nevertheless, in 2012, beginning farmers operated one fourth of the 2.1 million U.S. farms.

This document summarizes the characteristics of beginning and established farmers and the farms they operate. It considers beginning farmers in two groupings – principal farm operators who were on their current operation five years or less at the end of 2012 (i.e., they started on their current farm in the years 2008 through 2012) and those who were on their current operation six to ten years (they started on their current farm in the years 2003 through 2007). Established farmers are those who were on their current operation eleven years or more.

Beginning Farmer Characteristics

Of total beginning farmers in the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 226,670 were on their current farm five years or less, and 295,388 were on their current farm six to ten years. (Table 1)

Beginning farmers were, on average, younger than more established farmers. Of established farmers, 40 percent were 65 years or older; among farmers operating their current farm five years or less, only 11 percent were 65 or older. The average age was 46.9 years for those on their current farm five years or less, 50.8 years for those on their current farms six to ten years, and 61.4 years for established farmers.

Beginning farmers were also more likely to be female than established farmers, more likely to be minority, more likely to spend some time working off the farm, and less likely to consider farming their primary occupation. (Table 2)

Table 1
Beginning Farmers, 2007 and 2012

	2007	2012	% change
All beginning farmers (10 years or less on current operation)	652,820	522,058	-20*
Five years or less on current operation	291,329	226,670	-22*
Six to ten years on current operation	361,491	295,388	-18*

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Table 2

Principal Operator Characteristics by Years on Current Farm, 2012

	All Farms	Years on Current Farm		
		1 to 5	6 to 10	11+
Number	2,109,303	226,670	295,388	1,587,245
<i>percent of principal operators in group</i>				
Age				
< 35 years	6	24	14	1
35 to 64 years	61	64	70	59
65 years+	33	12	16	40
Gender				
Female	14	18	17	12
Male	86	82	83	88
Race / ethnicity				
White (non-Hispanic)	92	90	90	93
Minority ^a	8	10	10	7
Primary occupation				
Farming	48	37	37	51
Other	52	63	63	49
Worked off the farm				
Yes	61	77	73	56
No	39	23	27	44
Average age (years)	58.3	46.9	50.8	61.4

^a Includes Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, and multi-race.
Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

**Top Commodities, 2012
(\$ billions)**

	Beginning Farms ^a	All Farms
Cattle and calves	\$15.6	\$76.4
Poultry and poultry products	\$9.7	\$42.8
Corn	\$6.6	\$67.3
Milk from cows	\$6.5	\$35.5
Fruits, tree nuts, and berries	\$4.1	\$25.9
Soybeans	\$3.6	\$38.7
Hogs and pigs	\$3.2	\$22.5
Hay and other crops	\$2.3	\$16.1
Vegetables, melons, and potatoes	\$2.3	\$16.9
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod crops	\$2.1	\$14.5

^a Ten years or less on current farm.
Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Average Farm by Years on Farm

On average, farmers on their operations five years or less, as well as six to ten years, had smaller farms than established farmers in both agriculture sales and acres of farmland. A smaller percentage experienced a net gain from their operation. They had higher average expense-to-sales ratios and received less in government payments than established farmers. (Table 3)

Table 3

Average Farm, by Years Principal Operator on Current Farm, 2012

	All Farm Average	Years on Current Farm		
		1 to 5	6 to 10	11+
Farmland (acres)	434	294	277	483
Cropland harvested (acres)	244	118	131	278
Value of land and buildings (\$ millions)	\$1.1	\$0.6	\$0.7	\$1.2
Income and expenses (\$)				
Agriculture sales	\$187,097	\$106,197	\$125,269	\$210,156
Government payments	\$9,925	\$7,220	\$7,462	\$10,504
Production expenses	\$155,947	\$96,673	\$111,396	\$172,703
Percent of operators with net gain	46%	39%	37%	48%
Expense to sales ratio	83%	91%	89%	82%

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Beginning farmers operated 25 percent of U.S. farms, controlled 16 percent of farmland, and produced 15 percent of the value of agricultural products sold. They accounted for 22 percent of products sold directly to consumers and 26 percent of the value of organic sales. (Table 4)

Table 4

Shares of Agriculture Assets and Receipts, 2012

(percent of U.S. total)

	Beginning Farmers ^a	Years on Current Farm		
		1 to 5	6 to 10	11+
Number of farms	25	11	14	75
Land in farms	16	7	9	84
Cropland harvested	11	5	6	89
Land and buildings	15	6	9	85
Agriculture sales	15	6	9	85
Organic sales	26	9	17	74
Direct-to-consumer sales	22	10	12	78
Government payments	14	6	8	86

^a Ten years or less on current farm.

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

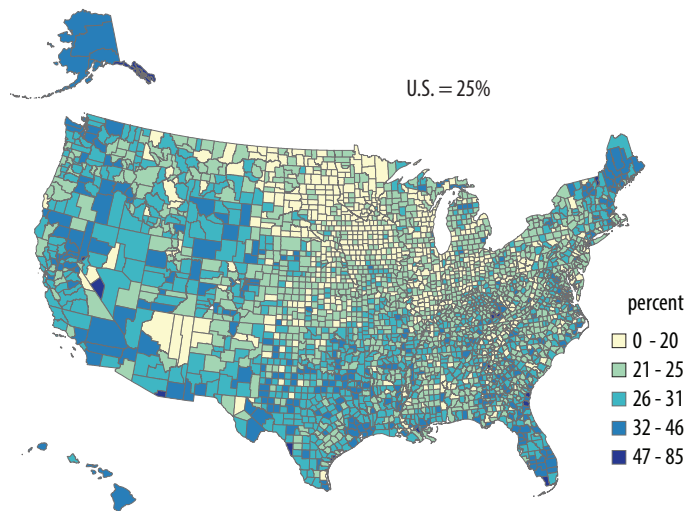
Across the States

Beginning farmers are found across the country, with some areas having relatively higher concentrations and some having few beginning farmers (map). The top ten states in percent of principal operators who are beginning farmers:

Alaska	37%	Vermont	30%
Rhode Island	33%	Washington	30%
Hawaii	33%	New Hampshire	30%
Maine	33%	California	29%
Florida	31%	Texas	29%

Beginning Farmers as Percent of All Farmers, by County, 2012

(percent on current operation ten years or less)



Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Comparing 2007 and 2012

This section looks at farmers five years or less on their current farm in a few key areas.

Farm Specialization. The number of farmers beginning on grain and oilseed farms, and on vegetable and melon farms, in the preceding five years was more than 30 percent higher in 2012 than 2007. Farms with a more than 30 percent decrease in such farmers included tobacco farms, cattle feedlots, hog and pig farms, poultry and egg farms, and other animal farms (including aquaculture, horses, etc.). The number of new farmers on beef cattle ranches was 19 percent fewer in 2012 than 2007.

Farm Size. The number of farmers on their current farm five years or less increased only among farms with 1,000 acres or more. Among the smallest farms – fewer than 50 acres – the number of farmers declined 28 percent between 2007 and 2012.

	2007	2012	% change
< 50 acres	162,620	116,562	-28*
50 to 179 acres	82,336	66,335	-19*
180 to 999 acres	38,577	35,414	-8
1,000 acres +	7,816	8,359	+7

Economic Class. In terms of economic class (defined by agriculture sales plus government payments), the number of farm operators on current farm five years or less increased in two classes. In the \$50,000 – \$249,999 and the \$250,000 – \$999,999 economic classes, such operators increased 20 and 26 percent, respectively, between 2007 and 2012. However, farms in the groups that increased made up only 15 percent of farmers starting in the preceding five years.

	2007	2012	% change
<\$50,000	259,416	188,725	-27*
\$50,000 to \$249,999	20,628	24,727	+20*
\$250,000 to \$999,999	7,579	9,586	+26*
\$1,000,000 +	3,706	3,632	-2

New Data on Years of Experience

The 2012 Census of Agriculture asked a new question to capture the number of beginning farmers by their total years of experience. The new data show that some farmers who were on their current operation ten years or less in 2012 had prior farming experience on another operation.

The 226,670 principal farm operators on their current farm five years or less had operated a farm for an average of 7.1 years, and 39,821 of them had operated a farm for more than ten years (including both their current and prior operations).

The 295,388 principal farm operators on their current farm six to ten years had operated a farm for an average of 11.1 years; a third (99,841) had operated a farm for more than ten years. This new information on total experience will be analyzed further.

The data summarized in this *Highlights* are for years on current farm. Included are data not previously available that were specially tabulated in connection with the USDA Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers meeting in June 2014.

About the Census of Agriculture

The Census of Agriculture is the leading source of facts and figures about American agriculture. USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts the census once every five years, and conducted the 2012 Census of Agriculture in early 2013 based on 2012 end-of-year data.

The 2012 Census results are now available, providing information at national, state, and county levels about what agricultural products were produced in the United States in 2012, where, how, and by whom.

Data are available in multiple formats to help all users, professional and casual, find and use exactly what they need. Tools include:

- [Quick Stats 2.0](#) – an online database to retrieve customized tables
- [A new tutorial video](#) – easy-to-follow instructions for Quick Stats
- [An API for developers](#) – In Quick Stats 2.0, click the “Developers” tab
- [Desktop Data Query Tool](#) – a downloadable desktop tool to analyze data without Internet access
- [Agricultural Atlas](#) – pattern and dot maps profiling many aspects of agriculture at the county level
- [Infographics](#) – fun, informative snippets of Census data and context
- [Highlights](#) – more documents like this one summarizing key facts on a topic

A link to census data is also available on USDA's open data portal, www.usda.gov/data.

www.agcensus.usda.gov