**Trends in Sugar Farm Size – 2017 Census of Agriculture**

***Overview***

Between 2012 and 2017, the number of farms producing sugar beets declined by 11 percent, and the number producing sugarcane fell by 6 percent. While these declines are substantially greater than the overall 3 percent decline in farm numbers reported in the *2017 Census of Agriculture,* they may reflect the fact that there are few very small farms in the sugar industry, whereas the smallest size categories are stable or growing in U.S. agriculture as a whole. Meanwhile, the largest size categories are also stable, both in sugar crops and overall U.S. agriculture. It is the middle size categories that are in decline.

**There are now just 4,123 farms producing sugar beets or sugarcane**, out of more than 2 million total U.S. farms.

***Farm numbers declined in the sugar crop sector from 2012 to 2017***

**In 2017, 3,496 farms produced sugar beets**, down 11 percent from 3,913 in 2012. **Sugarcane was produced on only 627 farms**, a decline of 6 percent from 666 in 2012. The average sugar beet farm had 329 acres of sugar beets, while the average sugarcane farm raised 1,345 acres.

Thus, in 2012 there were 4,579 farms producing either sugar beets or sugarcane, whereas the total in 2017 was 4,123 farms – 456 fewer. These totals illustrate that the sugar program confers its benefits on a small number of farms.

***Sugar crop farm numbers fell more than U.S. farm numbers as a whole***

The percentage decline in sugar farms was substantially greater than for all farms in the United States, which declined by 3 percent. This fact could be cited by sugar growers as evidence that the sugar program is insufficiently generous. One could also argue that the outsized decline is evidence that the sugar program harms both consumers and producers: Whatever its alleged merits, the program was associated with greater-than-average declines in farm numbers from 2012 to 2017.

***The difference may reflect the lack of very small farms in the sugar sector***

In reality, it seems more likely that the anomaly stems from the fact that the overwhelming majority of sugar crop farms are of commercial size. This is not surprising since most production is by cooperative members or on very large operations. For this reason, there are probably few “hobby farms” in the sugar industry. By contrast, among all U.S. farms, about one-third contain fewer than 50 acres and so (apart from specialty crops and some types of livestock and poultry production) are not likely to be the primary source of income for their owners. The smallest category of farms, below 10 acres, actually increased in number between 2012 and 2017, as did the largest category, above 2,000 acres. As has been the case for some years, it was the categories in between that declined the most. For example, the number of farms between 500 and 1,000 acres fell by 6 percent, double the overall percentage decline. Farms between 180 and 500 acres fell in number by an even greater 9 percent. Therefore, while it is true that the number of farms in the U.S. fell 3 percent between 2012 and 2017, this number masks stability and even growth at the top and bottom ends of the size range, and larger declines in the struggling middle.

Returning to sugar crops and taking into account average farm size, the decline in the number of sugar beet and sugarcane farms does not appear out of line with U.S. agriculture as a whole. The number of farms with more than 2,000 acres of sugar beets remained exactly the same at 30 farms. The number of farms with more than 2,000 acres of sugarcane declined slightly from 89 to 85, but the category just below that (between 1,000 and 2,000 acres) grew from 121 farms to 167. In the same size category, the number of sugar beet farms also remained constant at 149.

***Sugar crop farms are likely larger than suggested by sugar acres alone***

The Census does not report average *total* acres on farms producing sugar crops. This is particularly relevant in the sugar beet sector, where most if not all farms produce other crops such as wheat, corn or soybeans in addition to sugar beets. This means that sugar beet farms likely have considerably more *total* acres than simply those planted to beets. Thus, the size categories for acres in specific crops are not directly comparable to the size categories for all U.S. farms. Nevertheless, for most sugar beet farms, beets are likely their most profitable crop, especially with grain and oilseed prices depressed over a long period of time. The same is probably also true of sugarcane operations.

***Number of sugar farms by state***

Sugarbeets

California 54

Colorado 209

Idaho 460

Michigan 661

Minnesota 1,107

Montana 173

Nebraska 130

North Dakota 515

Oregon 58

Washington 5

Wyoming 124

Total sugarbeet farms 3,496

Sugarcane

Florida 124

Louisiana 391

Texas 103

Total sugarcane farms 627

**Total sugar farms 4,123**