

Census of Ag: Farmers aging, number of farms decreasing

Illinois' Ag Census data mirrors nationwide trends while... Cook County Agriculture shows signs of strength

FarmWeek/Cook County Farm Bureau



The 2017 Census of Agriculture data, released last month, shows the average age of Illinois farmers continues to increase while the total number of farms in Illinois is decreasing. (Photo by Catrina Rawson)

Following a nationwide trend, the average age of Illinois farmers continues to increase, according to 2017 Census of Agriculture data released in April.

The data also showed a decrease in the total number of farms in Illinois between 2012 and 2017. However, there was a nearly 40% increase in farm size 1 to 9 acres.

The Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, captures information about a variety of topics — from land use practices and crop insurance to the use of fertilizers and farm labor. New questions attempted to capture changing farming demographics, including veterans, women, as well as new and beginner farmers.

“Farms are becoming increasingly multigenerational in their management, as they become larger and more complex as businesses,” Mike Doherty, Illinois Farm Bureau Senior Economist, said. “Additionally, much of the back-breaking labor of farming has been replaced with machine operations, which allows older farmers to remain much more productive and involved in the family farming operations well into their ‘senior’ years.”

Census highlights from Illinois include:

- The average age of Illinois farmers increased to 58 — up from 56.3 in 2012. Nationwide, the average age of farmers was 57.5, up from 2012.
- Young farmers, 35 or younger, represent about 9.5 percent of all Illinois farmers. That mirrors nationwide statistics.
- About 24 percent of Illinois farmers are new and beginning farmers (have 10 years or less experience). Nationwide, 27 percent of all farmers fall into that category.
- The number of farms in Illinois dropped to 72,651 in 2017 — about 2,430 fewer than in 2012. The average size of them increased to 372 acres. Iroquois County had the largest number of farms in the state, according to the census, followed by LaSalle and McLean counties.

The census defines a farm as “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agriculture products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year.”

- The number of farms sized 1 to 9 acres increased during that five-year period, as did the number of farms with 2,000 acres or more. All other sized farms declined in numbers.

Operations in the very small farm category could be “hobby farms,” greenhouses, small hog operations or beginning organic producers, according to Mark Schleusener, Illinois state statistician.

Doherty said the presence of direct marketing outlets, such as farmers’ markets, and interest in sourcing “locally grown food” also plays a role in the increasing number of small-acreage farms in Illinois.

Meanwhile, more than 2,500 farms in Illinois totaled 2,000 acres or more in 2017, and consist of corn, soybeans and wheat.

- Illinois was the highest-producing soybean state in the country in 2017, with 36,681 farms growing 10.6 million acres.
- Illinois was also the largest producer of pumpkins and horseradish.
- Illinois was the second-highest producer of corn in the United States and ranked second in total crop sales.
- Illinois had the fourth-largest hog inventory with 2,153 farms raising more than 5 million hogs.

Also worth bragging about: Illinois had the highest response rate for the census at 78 percent. Schleusener attributed the high response rate to partnerships with organizations such as Illinois Farm Bureau and other commodity groups.

“Thank you to all the farmers and ranchers that told us about their farms,” Schleusener said.

The next Census of Agriculture will be conducted in 2022.

Sidebar Box

2017 Cook County Census of Agriculture Highlights...

Meet the Cook County Farmer (324 Farm Producers Reporting)

- 110 female | 214 male
- 36 have Military Service
- 116 are new farmers with less than 5 years working on a farm
- 29 are under the age of 35
- 59.3 years is the average farmer's age
- 19.1 years is the average length of time a farmer has worked on a farm

Info regarding the Cook County Farms (182 Farm Reported)

- 11,903 total farmed acres
- 65 acres is the average size farm
- Average income per farm is \$11,877
- Market value per farm is \$108,186
- 38 farms offer agritourism & recreation
- 86 farms employ payroll labor equaling \$8,682,000
- Crop sales reporting at \$17,626,000

County Farm Crops Harvested

- Corn - 17 farms - 2,504 acres harvested
- Hay - 26 farms - 1,256 acres harvested
- Oats - 4 farms – 118 acres harvested
- Soybeans - 25 farms – 5,168 acres harvested
- Wheat (winter) - 3 farms – 254 acres harvested
- Christmas Tree - 4 Farms – 18 acres harvested
- Greenhouses (various crops) - 20 farms – 641,608 sq. ft of glass
- Orchards – 23 Farms
- Vegetables (various crops) – 37 Farms – 713 acres
- 3 Organic farms

County Farm Livestock Stats

- 741 equine on 45 farms, valuing \$1,599,000
- 1,337 colonies of bees on 48 farms with \$317,000 in honey sales
- 1,180 chickens on 30 farms
- 108 cattle on 17 farms
- 28 pigs on 9 farms
- 72 sheep on 13 farms
- 56 goats on 16 farms
- 32 alpacas on 7 farms
- Geese, ducks, peacocks, peahens, guineas and aquaculture farms reported

2017 Census of Agriculture for Cook County showed notable increases in the number of female farmers and increased vegetable production in the county.