

Statistical Brief

Spotlight on Small Farms

Half of all farms in the United States had sales of less than \$10,000 in 1987. Censuses of agriculture provide detailed data about U.S. farms, including these "small" farms. This Brief profiles small farms and their operators using information from the 1987 and prior censuses of agriculture.

Who Operates Small Farms?

Most small farmers don't rely on farming for their living. In 1987:

- Less than one-third of all small farmers had farming as their primary occupation.
- More than three-fourths of all large farm operators worked primarily as farmers.

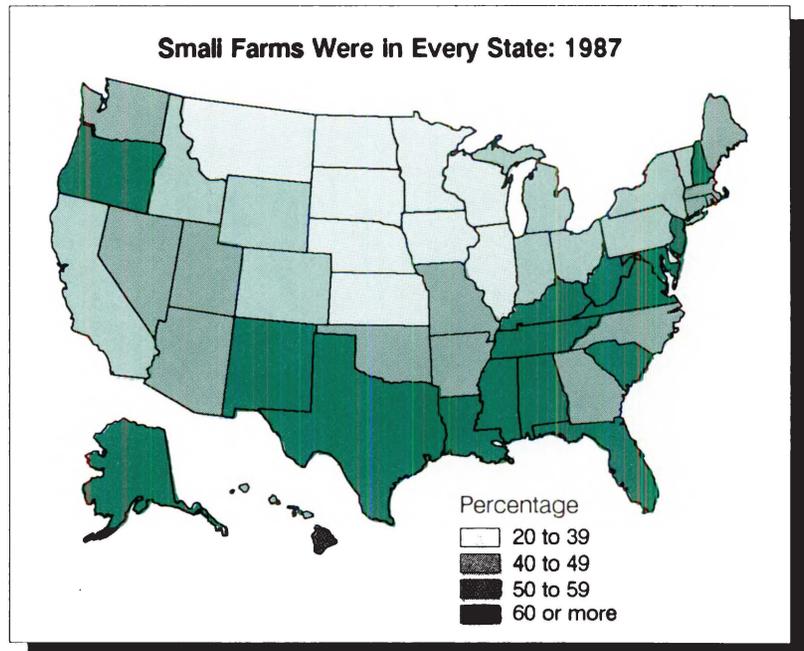
The 1 million-plus small farm operators were more likely to be older, female, and owners of all the farmland they operated. In 1987:

- The average age of small farmers was over 53 years, nearly 3 years older than large operators.
- Only 1 in 10 small farm operators was under age 35, versus 1 in 6 among larger operators.



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BUREAU OF THE CENSUS



- Women operated nearly 9 percent of all small farms, but only 4 percent of the large farms.
- Over 75 percent of small farmers owned all the land they farmed, versus 42 percent for large farm operators.

Where Are Small Farms?

A small farm is probably just down the road. Small farms are widespread throughout the United States. They covered 135 million acres in 1987, about 14 percent of all farmland.

- In every State, at least 1 in every 5 farms was small.
- In Appalachian and Gulf Coast areas, more than 2 out of 3 farms were small.
- Even in Fresno County, California, the county with the

highest agricultural sales in the Nation, 32 percent of the farms were small.

Are Small Farms Profitable?

Most are not profitable: in 1987, small farms averaged net cash losses of \$1,700 per farm, and only 1 in every 3 reported a net cash gain. Small farms produced less than 3 percent of all agricultural sales. Also, in 1987, small farms had:

- Only \$3,100 in average farm product sales.
- Less than 3¢ in sales for each \$1 in assets.
- Interest expense of nearly one-fifth of sales.
- Only 4 percent of all Federal agricultural payments to farmers.

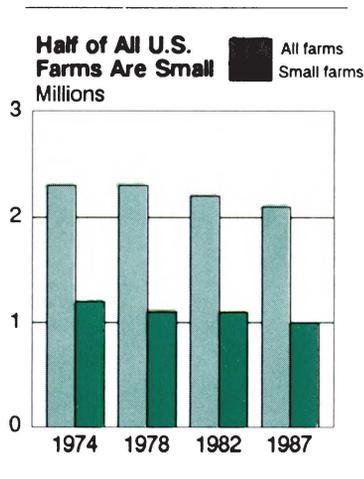
What Do Small Farms Produce?

Most small farms were beef cattle or horse farms. Fifty-six percent had beef cattle, and 3 of every 5 horses were on small farms. Crops were less widespread than livestock, but hay, grain, tobacco, and fruit were common. Small farms accounted for two-thirds of all tobacco farms.

Traditional egg and butter money has all but disappeared from small farms. Because of contract production in a concentrated poultry industry and the greater efficiency of large dairies, only 1 percent of small farms were poultry and dairy farms.

What Is The Future?

Small farms have remained about half of the farm count for many years in spite of their average negative net cash return. Much of their resilience, vitality, and independence comes from their ability to supplement farm receipts with off-farm income. Small farms continue to be formed, and provide a preferred place of residence and way of life that is not likely to disappear as the 20th century comes to a close.



This is one of a series of occasional reports from the Census Bureau that provide timely information about our people and economy. The data presented come primarily from the 1987 Census of Agriculture and are subject to both sampling and nonsampling errors. See Volume 1, U.S. Geographic Series for any State for a complete description of statistical methods, quality, and limitations.

For further information on this Brief :

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For further information on agriculture censuses and farm classifications :

See
1987 Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, United States Summary and State Data, AC87-A-51, November 1989.

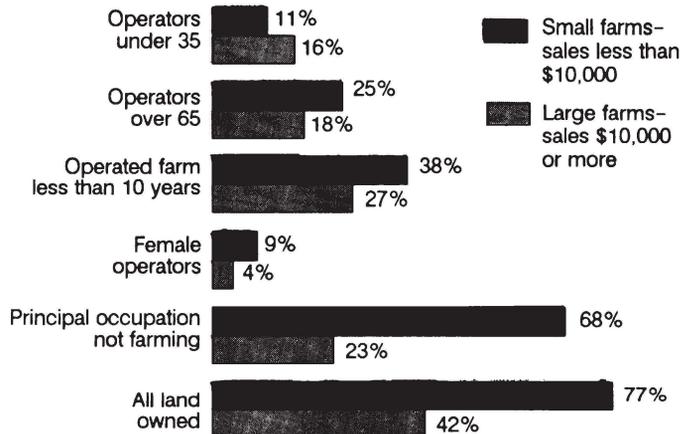
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Profile of Farms: 1987

Small Farm Operators Are Older



Small Farm Returns Are Negative



Revenue Sources Are Different

