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US losing farm land at alarming rates

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Results from the 2012 U.S. Census of Agriculture were released recently, and both Kansas and Oklahoma seem to be following the nationwide trends in some of the categories.

The numbers for individual counties will not be available till May, but USDA did release figures for both the country and each of the 50 states.

Overall, the U.S., between 2007 and 2012, lost nearly 100,000 farms and about 7.5 million acres of farm land. Kansas itself lost nearly 4,000 farms and 200,000 acres of farm land over the five-year period.

Oklahoma lost even more than that, according to the census. The Sooner state saw a decline of more than 6,000 farms from 2007 to 2012 and almost 1 million acres of farm land.

The U.S., along with Kansas and Oklahoma, though, did grow in the average farm size, the census reported. In 2007, the average size of a farm in America was about 418 acres, and that number increased to approximately 434 acres in 2012.

Both Kansas and Oklahoma showed similar gains, with Kansas increasing about 14 acres in farm size and Oklahoma's farms growing by about 23 acres per unit.

As for the age groups of the people operating the farm, those numbers were mixed over the five-year period of the census. The number of operators under the age of 25 in the U.S. shrank by a little more than 1,000. Oklahoma figures for that age group showed a little more than 200 less producers, while Kansas numbers decreased by almost 70.

Nationwide data for the age 25 to 34 group grew by about nearly 2,500 operators. Oklahoma showed a gain of about 17 in this group, while Kansas gained more than 60 new producers.

The 35 to 44 age group saw significant declines in the U.S., Kansas and Oklahoma. Overall, America lost nearly 5,500 farm operators from 2007 to 2012. Oklahoma lost around 1,100 producers in this age group, while Kansas losing about 750.

Producers from age 45 to 54 also saw a decrease over the five-year period of the Census. The U.S. numbers declined sharply with a loss of nearly 100,000 producers. Oklahoma itself lost nearly 3,000 farmers in this age group, with Kansas losing nearly 3,500.

For the 55 to 64 age group, the U.S. and Kansas showed increases, while Oklahoma had a loss in its numbers. Age 55 to 64, the U.S. gained nearly 12,000 new farmers, with Kansas increasing its figures by about 1,000. The Sooner State, however, lost more than 1,500 producers in this group.

The U.S. once again showed growth in the 65 to 74 age group. America gained more than 30,000 new farmers over the Census time frame, while Kansas itself showed a slight decrease of about 150 new producers. Oklahoma, though, decreased its numbers by about 500 in the category.

The final category, age 75 and older, showed increases in both the U.S. and Oklahoma, while the Sunflower State lost some producers. Overall, America gained almost 15,000 farmers in this group, and Oklahoma increased by 65. Kansas, however, lost nearly 75 producers.

Both male and female operators likewise decreased in both Oklahoma and Kansas, as well as the U.S., according to the Census. Kansas lost more than 2,500 male operators and around 1,200 female operators over the five-year time frame.

Oklahoma showed a decrease of about 4,500 male operators and nearly 2,000 female producers. America itself lost more than 75,000 male farmers and nearly 20,000 female producers during the Census period.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said Census data indicates, however, that the loss of farm land has slowed significantly since 2007, which means that while a total of 72 million acres of farm land have been lost since the 1982 Census, the tide is turning.

Vilsack added that new tools in the 2014 Farm Bill should help to further slow and perhaps even reverse this trend in some areas of the country.

“The results reinforce what we have known for many years,” he said. “The farm population is aging. While that is a concern, the data also show that the number of young farmers increased slightly and the number of minority farm and ranch principal operators increased dramatically, reflecting the changing face of America as a whole. We are hopeful that USDA policies that attract and retain the next generation of talent into rural America will help to continue this trend.”

Vilsack said the 2014 Farm Bill will do even more to expand support for beginning farms and new market opportunities for all producers.

“At the same time, we cannot ignore that devastating weather events increasingly impact producers’ bottom lines,” he said. “The prolonged drought and lack of disaster assistance over the past several years have made it even tougher for livestock producers and mid-sized farms to survive and thrive, and the data reflects that reality.”

Vilsack added more must be done to protect the middle farms and ranches that are middle-sized and mid-income and ensure that they can access resources and protections to help them thrive. Here too, the Farm Bill will provide much-needed relief and stability through guaranteed disaster assistance.

“More than anything, the census illustrates the power of data,” Vilsack said. “Data from the census helps to inform smart policy making that makes life easier for farmers and ranchers.”

Vilsack said America is on the right track, but there is still more work to do.

“In order to survive, American agriculture must continue to embrace innovation and diversity in crop production, markets, people and land use.”

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