

COW/CALF CORNER

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USDA Data Mission is More Vital than Ever

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U.S. agriculture is in the midst of the most significant structural changes in two generations. Record crop and livestock prices are testament to increased demand for agricultural resources. Changes in the values of various crop and forage alternatives, combined with regional changes in feed availability are resulting in significant regional shifts in crop and livestock production that are only just beginning and will continue for many years. Agricultural markets, like no time in history, are characterized by extreme volatility and dynamics. Producers in all regions are struggling to sort out market incentives and allocate agricultural resources according to new and changing demands; policymakers and industry leaders are struggling to understand new market environments and policy implications and alternatives; and consumers are concerned about food security and rising food prices. Arguably, the need for agricultural data has never been greater.

And yet, there are disturbing threats to the data system that provides critical fundamental support for the U.S. food and fiber sector. In an environment of federal and state fiscal dilemmas, numerous program cuts are being made that reduce or eliminate data collection and dissemination and additional cuts are proposed. Data seems to be easily overlooked as a priority, especially among agencies in which data collection is not a primary function. Even among agencies such as the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), where data are major responsibilities, program cuts are underway that seem rather ad-hoc and with little consideration to the impacts on the overall data system.

There are several reasons that USDA and state data missions must continue. First, since the early days of the USDA, the value of agricultural data as a public good has been recognized and embraced as a priority. Publically supported data supports the U.S. food and fiber sector by reducing the imbalance of information available to many small, dispersed producers relative to

the much smaller number of buyers of agricultural commodities. In times when there is ever greater concern about the impacts of changing industry structure and competition in agriculture this role is perhaps more important than any time in history. This information not only benefits producers directly but also increases the reliability and efficiency of the food sector for the benefit of millions of consumers in the U.S. and globally.

Agriculture is one of the critical infrastructures of the country and certainly the most difficult to protect. The Homeland Security considerations of the U.S. food system depend on the availability of complete and reliable data of the sector. Growing questions of food security, food safety and food biosecurity all depend on having accurate and timely data available to government, industry and academic sectors involved in assessing, researching and implementing food safety and biosecurity systems.

Agricultural data supports many market and program functions in addition to the commonly recognized policy, research and market functions. Data is at the heart of the administration of many farm programs in the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other agencies. Publically reported information is necessary for proper function of commodity futures markets, not only with respect to actual cash settlement or delivery procedures but also with respect to producers' ability to determine basis in different locations are thereby make feasible the use of futures for risk management. The Risk Management Agency (RMA) relies on publically reported information to make many of the various risk management products available. Commodity indemnity programs used by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) depend on publically reported prices. The oversight activities of the Grain Inspection and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) depend, in significant measure, on the umbrella of publically reported market data. Agricultural research, teaching and extension programs at Land Grant universities and other agricultural programs will be greatly impacted by any loss of data quantity and quality. Data disruptions, even if later resumed, create gaps that can never be replaced and affect research ability for many years. There are, no doubt many more examples of programs and activities that will be impacted by the loss of data. The consequences are difficult to estimate but are almost surely greater than currently being considered in some of the proposed changes and cuts to data systems.

The quality and quantity of agricultural data available in the U.S. has, for many years, supported research, policy and market functions that contributed significantly to the efficiency and productivity responsible for the inexpensive, high quality and safe food supply that we have come to expect. The availability of abundant and high-quality data is easy to take for granted until you don't have it. The investment is a significant one but the costs of not having good data surely exceed the costs of maintaining a comprehensive data system. The current budget realities mean that some cuts are likely inevitable but it is possible to make adjustments and identify efficiencies to avoid jeopardizing the critical data mission of USDA and state governments. There are several steps that must be taken to ensure the continued integrity of the U.S. agricultural data system. Among those are:

- All changes and cuts in data collection and dissemination should be evaluated in a comprehensive assessment that considers the interactions between different data sources and types and the priorities of data in terms of the many dimensions of data quality and quantity.

The quality of data depends, not only on the internal data characteristics, but also how one data series interacts with other data, with respect to a complete data picture regarding stocks versus flows, structure and changes over time, timeliness and reliability of the data relative to user needs, and other considerations.

-Maintain a priority of disaggregated data collection. The obvious easy way to reduce costs is to stop collecting data at the county and sub-state regional level and substitute more aggregated data collection. Not only does this affect many uses and users of the disaggregated data, it also inevitably reduces the quality of data when it is only developed at the state or federal level. Maintaining a gutted shell of the current data system is not the answer. U.S. data is recognized as high quality because of the disaggregated manner in which it is collected and assembled.

- Enforce interagency commitment and collaboration in data collection and sharing, especially in agencies in which data collection is not the primary mission. There is no doubt that some efficiency and fiscal savings can be achieved by reducing the duplication of efforts across agencies and minimizing the bureaucratic jungle that reduces, slows and prevents interagency cooperation. High-level USDA leadership is needed to ensure that appropriate data collection and sharing are a priority for all USDA agencies. States also need to maintain a commitment to state-federal partnerships and continue supporting data collection in the states. It is very short-sighted and a disservice to agricultural industries and consumers for state governments to abdicate a role and responsibility in data collection and dissemination.

U.S. agriculture faces many challenges as well as opportunities in the coming years. Failure to maintain a robust and healthy data system could well lead to a situation in a few years where it is impossible to even assess the status of the U.S. food and fiber sector let alone have the information necessary to meet the challenges and opportunities of dynamic U.S. and global agricultural and food markets.

Forage Testing -- A Key Decision Aide in 2011

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Oklahoma producers find themselves out of their "comfort zone" as they go into the winter of 2011-2012. Many have marginal or inadequate forage supplies. However, others may find themselves with forage of unknown origin (because they justifiably felt the need to purchase whatever hay they could find) and therefore of unknown quality. In some cases, producers may cut and bale hay in the latter weeks of October, because the October rains have allowed re-growth of some warm season pastures. Late October or November certainly is not the ideal time to harvest warm season pastures, but when other hay is scarce, that re-growth is hard to turn down. Some of this "late cutting" hay could be adequate in protein and energy content, while other fields may yield very low quality forage and need considerable supplementation to enhance the usefulness of the hay.

Perhaps the most frightening "unknown" about hay this year is the potential for nitrate accumulation in some hay crops. Johnsongrass, millets, forage sorghums, sudan hybrids were heat and drought stressed across much of the southwest. Any of these plants when stressed can

accumulate toxic levels of nitrate. Read more about this topic in [OSU Fact Sheet PSS-2903 Nitrate Toxicity in Livestock](#) available online or at any [OSU County Extension Office](#).

Forage analysis can be a useful tool to remove some of the mystery concerning the hay that producers will feed this winter. Testing the grass hays this year for protein and energy content will help the producer design winter supplementation programs most appropriate for the forage supply that is available. Any of the potential nitrate accumulating hays should be tested for nitrate concentration.

Forage quality has two important benefits to cows or heifers. First higher quality forages contain larger concentrations of important nutrients so animals consuming these forages should be more likely to meet their nutrient needs from the forages. Secondly, and just as important, animals can consume a larger quantity of higher quality forages. Higher quality forages are fermented more rapidly in the rumen leaving a void that the animal can fill with additional forage. Consequently, forage intake increases. For example, low quality forages (below about 6% crude protein) will be consumed at about 1.5% of body weight (on a 100% dry matter basis) per day. Higher quality grass hays (above 8% crude protein) may be consumed at about 2.0% of body weight. Excellent forages, such as good alfalfa, silages, or green pasture may be consumed at the rate of 2.5% of body weight per day. The combination of increased nutrient content AND increased forage intake makes high quality forage very valuable to the animal and the producer.

There are several good methods of sampling hay for forage analysis. Most nutritionists would prefer to use a mechanical coring probe made specifically for this purpose. The coring probe is usually a stainless steel tube with a serrated, cutting edge. It is 1 inch in diameter and is designed to fit on a 1/2 inch drill or brace. Cordless drills make these tools quite mobile so that the hay bales to be tested do not have to be hauled to be near an electrical outlet. The hay samples are placed in paper or plastic bags for transfer to a forage testing laboratory. Cores are taken from several bales at random to obtain a representative sample to be analyzed.

Grab samples can also be obtained and tested. To receive the best information, grab several samples by hand from about 6 inches into the open side of the bale or the middle third of a small round bale. Place all of the sample in the bag. Do not discard weeds or stems, just because they look undesirable. They are still part of the hay that you are offering to the livestock. Be certain to label the forage samples accurately and immediately, in order for the laboratory analysis to be correctly assigned to the proper hay piles or bales. Obviously the more samples that are sent to the laboratory for analysis, the more information can be gained. Just as obvious is the fact that as the number of samples increase, the cost of forage testing increases. Read more about forage sampling in [OSU Fact Sheet PSS-2589 Collecting Forage Samples for Analysis](#).

Samples can be taken to the OSU County Extension office near you and then sent to the [OSU Soil, Water, and Forage Analytical Laboratory in Agricultural Hall](#) on the campus at Stillwater. A price list of forage quality analysis can be found on the laboratory website: (<http://www.soiltesting.okstate.edu/>). There are other commercial laboratories available in the Oklahoma City area that also do an excellent job of forage analysis.

Producers that find moldy hay or have concerns about mycotoxins in forages should take hay samples to their local veterinarian. These samples then can be forwarded to the [Oklahoma Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory](#) in Stillwater for mycotoxin analysis and appropriate recommendations.

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