

# Census of Agriculture identifies trends shaping California's farm industry

By Don Villarejo

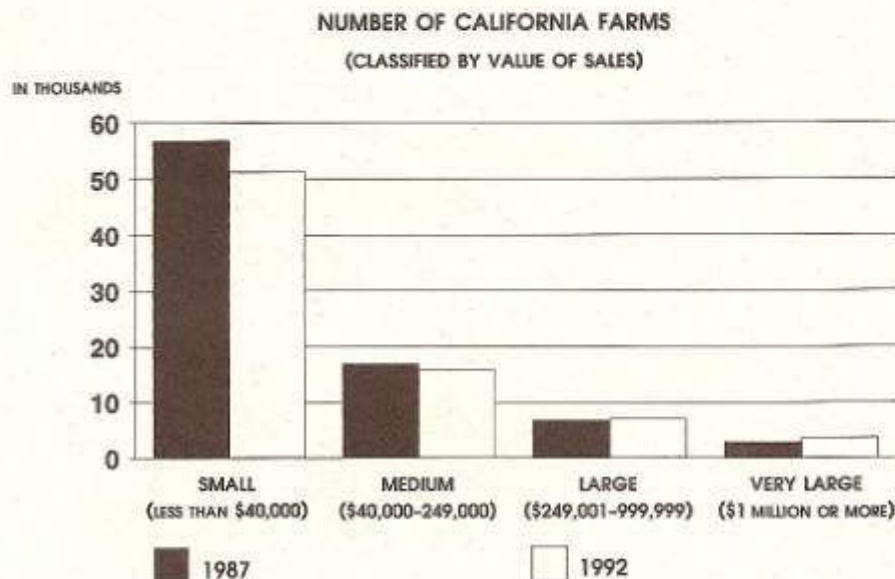
**T**HE JUST-RELEASED 1992 *Census of Agriculture* identifies a number of trends emerging in California's agricultural sector, covering a spectrum of topics that includes farm size, profit margin, agricultural land use, occupational safety, and chemical use. Conducted every five years, the Census of Agriculture provides a comprehensive snapshot of the nation's agricultural economy. Below are some of the latest data on issues which will shape California's multi-billion-dollar agricultural industry as it moves toward the next century.

## Farm size and profit

The ranks of California's farms thinned significantly between 1987 and 1992, from a high of 83,217 to a low of 77,669, a loss of 5,548 operations, or almost 7 percent. Equally significant, small farms—those with annual sales of less than \$40,000—accounted for the entire decline. Apparently, the aftershocks of the mid-1980s national farm depression are still being felt, especially by the small-scale family farmer.

In contrast, California's largest farms—those with annual sales of \$1 million or more—are performing rather well (please see chart, above). Between 1987 and 1992, the aggregate market value of California's agricultural products grew from \$13.9 billion to \$17.1 billion, a gain of \$3.2 billion, or 23 percent.

This increase in farm cash receipts resulted largely from two factors: a rise in farm prices from the depressed levels of the mid-1980s, and growth in the production of high-value commodities such as fresh vegetables. During the same period, aggregate sales for California's largest operations rose 37 percent, from \$8.3 billion to \$11.4 billion, meaning that the state's biggest



farms accounted for virtually the entire total gain in agricultural sales. Though impressive, the finding is not surprising given the continuing shift from family farms to large-scale, corporate farm operations.

This five-year upswing in farm cash receipts was accompanied by a correspondingly large increase in farm production expenses. In fact, total farm production expenses grew by \$2.9 billion, or 27 percent, only \$300 million less than the total growth in farm sales. As a result, the *net* cash return from agricultural sales rose only slightly, from \$2.927 billion to \$3.179 billion. Although California farmers sold \$3.2 billion more in agricultural commodities in 1992 than they did in 1987, they realized an additional net cash return of only \$252 million.

## Cropland

While aggregate farm land shrunk from 30.6 million to 29.0 million acres between 1987 and 1992, total harvested cropland experienced a small increase, growing

from 7.676 million to 7.761 million acres. At the same time, irrigated land declined only slightly, from 7.596 million to 7.571 million acres.

The tentative growth in harvested cropland and negligible decline in irrigated land suggest that the conversion of land from agricultural use to urban development does not correspond to a vanishing of the state's most productive cropland. Interestingly, the state's most rapidly urbanizing counties—Fresno, Kern, Madera, Mendocino, Merced, Monterey, Napa, Riverside, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, Solano, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Yolo—all reported *more* harvested cropland in 1992 than in 1987.

## Farm labor

In 1992, the Census Bureau resumed asking farm operators to report the number of workers they had hired, a question that had been deleted from the 1987 Census. Compared to the 1982

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Census data, the most recent figures show both an increase in the number of directly hired workers who were employed for at least 150 days that year, and a sharp decline in the number hired for less than 150 days. The latter trend probably reflects farm operators' growing reliance on labor contractors (please see chart, right). Combined hired and contract labor expenses reached \$3.9 billion in 1992, an increase of \$891 million, or 29 percent, over the total reported in 1987.

The Census Bureau also added a question regarding the number of occupational injuries or deaths on the farm, both for hired workers and for farm operators and family members. While farm operators and their families experienced 705 injuries in 1992, direct-hire employees reported 11,568 injuries—*sixteen times more* than farmers and family members. This gap underlines the need for a more concerted effort to promote occupational safety among California's hired farm labor.

**Agricultural chemicals**

California farms spent \$694.5 million on agricultural chemicals in 1992, an

**FARM LABOR CONTRACT EXPENSE  
IN CALIFORNIA**

(AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL LABOR EXPENSES)

|      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1978 | 17.5% |
| 1982 | 18.5% |
| 1987 | 20.5% |
| 1992 | 24.9% |

In the past 15 years, farm labor contractors have gained control over an increasing share of the farm labor market.

increase of about 28 percent over 1987 costs. Though the total number of harvested cropland acres remained relatively stable between 1987 and 1992, the aggregate number of acres treated with insecticides, nematicides, and crop disease chemicals grew slightly, from 6.8 million to 7.1 million acres. Only in the case of herbicides, or defoliant, was there a reported decrease in treated acres.

The number of farms reporting any chemical or fertilizer use declined by 4,662, or 8 percent, during the five-year

period, for a total of 52,917 in 1992. By this measure, some progress, however small, is being made toward reduced chemical use. ♦

Source: 1992 Census of Agriculture. Volume 1. Geographic Area Series. Part 5. California. State and County Data, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, September 1994, 443 pp. plus appendices. For further information, call the Agriculture Division Information Office at 1-800-523-3215.

**ORGANIZING, cont. from page 3**

operate with the numerous self-help associations formed by indigenous immigrants from Mexico.

One disquieting defect of this book is that Ms. Edid overlooks some of the most valuable information currently available. For example, she does not cite the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), the largest interview-based survey of farm workers ever undertaken in this country. Begun in 1988, NAWS is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, and interviews about 2,500 workers each year. Despite Ms. Edid's categorical statement that "(a)ccurate and credible data on the farm worker population is non-existent, . . ." NAWS has provided a remarkably detailed por-

trait of demographic and economic data.

Another oversight is the neglect of important scholarly contributions, such as Cletus Daniel's *Bitter Harvest*. Published in 1981 by Cornell University Press, it remains one of the very best histories of farm labor organizing in the period prior to World War II. Ms. Edid's narrative of the early years of farm worker unions would have been strengthened by reference to this work.

In summary, *Farm Labor Organizing* provides the only contemporary overview of the status of its subject. The work's main strength lies in its breadth of coverage, but this comes at the cost of depth of analysis and understanding. ♦

**UFW scores another election victory**

After weeks of demonstrations and accusations, employees of the nation's largest rose bush stock farm won the right to be represented by the United Farm Workers of America/AFL-CIO (UFW).

By a vote of 648 to 433, union supporters prevailed in the December 16 election, marking the first time in Bear Creek Production Company's 127-year history that employees have been represented by a labor union. The Wasco-based firm, which employs 1,400 workers, pledged to comply with the election results and enter into good faith negotiations with the UFW.

UFW officials and their supporters were jubilant after officials from the Agricultural Labor Relations Board tallied the final votes, giving the union a decisive majority. The Bear Creek victory is the union's eighth straight electoral win since UFW President Arturo Rodriguez announced last spring that the union would focus most of its resources on field organizing. As a result of this renewed effort, the UFW now represents an additional 2,700 farm workers. ♦