

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS AND PRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES— A GENERAL VIEW

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MAJOR SECTORS IN AGRICULTURE

One of the striking features of American agriculture is the diversity of farming—the differences in crops and livestock grown on farms in various areas, the wide range in size of farms, and the contrast in the way farm resources are used.

In a Nation so vast in land area, there are wide variations in topography, climate, and soils. The terrain varies from alluvial reaches and flat coastal plains and prairies, to rolling hills, to mountain valleys, and plateaus. Soil types differ in composition and fertility and in their adaptability for crops and grasses. Climatic conditions range from semitropical in the southernmost parts of the country to cooler northern areas that have a growing season of only a few months; and from the relatively heavy rainfall of the East to some western regions where the rainfall can support only the sparsest vegetation.

Along with growth and development of the Nation's economy, basic changes have taken place that have created even greater differences in economic environments. Some of these differences have been due to shifts in concentrations of population and markets, to changes in consumer food habits, and to developments in processing and transportation of farm products. Others relate to technological improvements in farming that have increased the total farm production while reducing the need for so many farm workers.

Differences in farming over the United States are explainable largely in terms of man's efforts in adapting himself to his environment. Each farmer makes the decisions of how to use the land, labor, and capital resources at his disposal. His decisions are made within the framework of his appraisal of his environment and of the relative advantage of alternative courses of action. Because the environment is constantly changing, the process is never complete but one of continuous adjustment to changing conditions in both farm and nonfarm sectors of the economy.

Changes that affect agriculture have been particularly rapid in recent decades. Technological developments in farming have brought about substantial increases in crop and livestock yields. Substitution of tractors for workstock has meant that many acres that were used previously to produce feed for workstock are now devoted to production for human use. The result has been a phenomenal increase in farm output.

Mechanization of farming has enabled a smaller farm labor force to tend and harvest this larger farm output. The output per man-hour of farm labor has increased by nearly 3 times since 1910. (See figure 1.) Farmers have been faced with the fact that fewer people are required to produce the foods and fibers for a growing population off the farms.

At the same time, growth and expansion of the economy has provided increasing job opportunities in the nonfarm sector. Many farm people, particularly farm youth, have left for other occupations. The farm population has decreased by 10 million since 1910 and now comprises only an eighth of the total population in the United States. (See figure 2.)

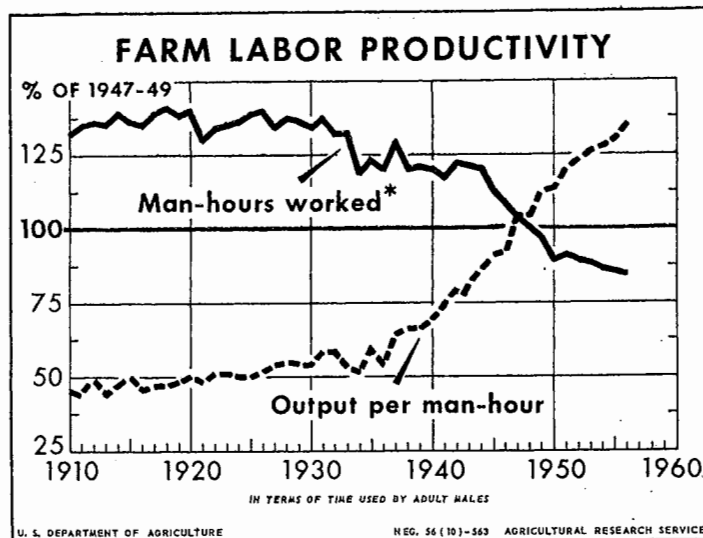


FIGURE 1.

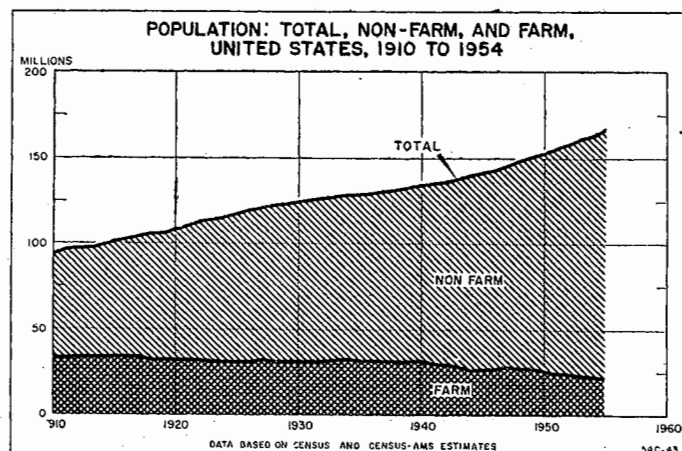


FIGURE 2.

Growth in the agricultural sector has been accompanied by changes in the nature and purpose of individual farm units. Production of many enterprises such as dairying and poultry have become more specialized. Many farmers have increased the scope and efficiency of their farming through the application of improved techniques. At the same time, the pull of opportunities elsewhere has persuaded others to reduce the size of their farm businesses and to take up work in nearby towns and factories. Now that electrification and farm-to-market roads have brought city conveniences to all but the remote rural areas, many city workers have moved to the country. Some of these rural residents raise farm products for home use and incidental sales.