



The VIEW FROM HERE

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As a general rule, folks in production agriculture like to play things close to the vest and keep their matters relatively private, especially when it comes to discussing finances and assets.

I will never forget where I learned that lesson. I was sitting across the dinner table as a rookie journalist doing one of my first interviews for the magazine. I innocently enough asked the gentleman how many cows he had and on how many acres he ran them. He looked me square in the eye and said, “Why don’t you just ask to see my checking account and bank statements?”

While I understand where he is coming from, there are certain times, when in my opinion, it is okay to make an exception and share those facts. One of those times recently arrived in your mailbox.

It’s time once again to fill out the Census of Agriculture. The forms were mailed to farmers and ranchers across the United States in early January.

Conducted every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Census is a complete count of the nation’s farms and ranches and the men and women who operate them.

The Census looks at everything from land use, to production practices, to income and expenditures. It is important to note, it provides the ONLY source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every county in the nation.

According to some literature I saw, the Census of Agriculture provides information that benefits producers and their communities in many different ways. Policy-makers use the data when making decisions concerning agricultural and rural programs, and community planners use the data to target needed services to rural residents. Depending upon the circumstances, companies also use the information to help determine where to locate their operations.

I suppose we could argue about how the powers-that-be actually use the data, but I for one take some solace in the fact my data has been turned in when things like the Farm Bill and the Energy Bill are being cussed and discussed by our elected officials.

Think of it this way. For those of you who don’t spend a lot of time looking at the past performance of your operation, gathering up the information and filling out the Census may be an eye-opening experience and lead you to make some beneficial changes to your own program. For some of us, that is reason enough to spend an hour or so filling out the form.

To be honest, I can’t say for sure whether or not filling out the form is mandatory, but I do feel like this is akin to participating in the democratic process on the local, state and national level. If you don’t vote, you really don’t have much of a leg to stand on should one of our elected officials put his or her foot wrong.

The forms are to be completed and returned by February 4. For more information call 888-4Ag-Stat or visit www.agcensus.usda.gov. I should also mention that the data provided by individual producers is kept confidential by law and is only published in the form of geographical summaries.

And to that gentleman who taught me just how personal some of this data can be, I hope he decides to make an exception just this once.

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