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# Characteristics of Women Farm Operators and Their Farms

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## What Is the Issue?

The share of U.S. farms operated by women nearly tripled over the past three decades, from 5 percent in 1978 to 14 percent by 2007. Although there have always been women farm operators, national-level statistics to track their numbers and examine their characteristics were not available until the Census of Agriculture began asking for principal farm operators' gender in 1978. Using census data from 1978 through 2007, this report provides detailed information about women farmers and the types of farms they operate.

## What Are the Study Findings?

In this report, “women-operated farms” are defined as those whose principal operator—the individual most responsible for the day-to-day decisions of the farm (or ranch)—is a woman. Based on this definition, results of the analysis were as follows:

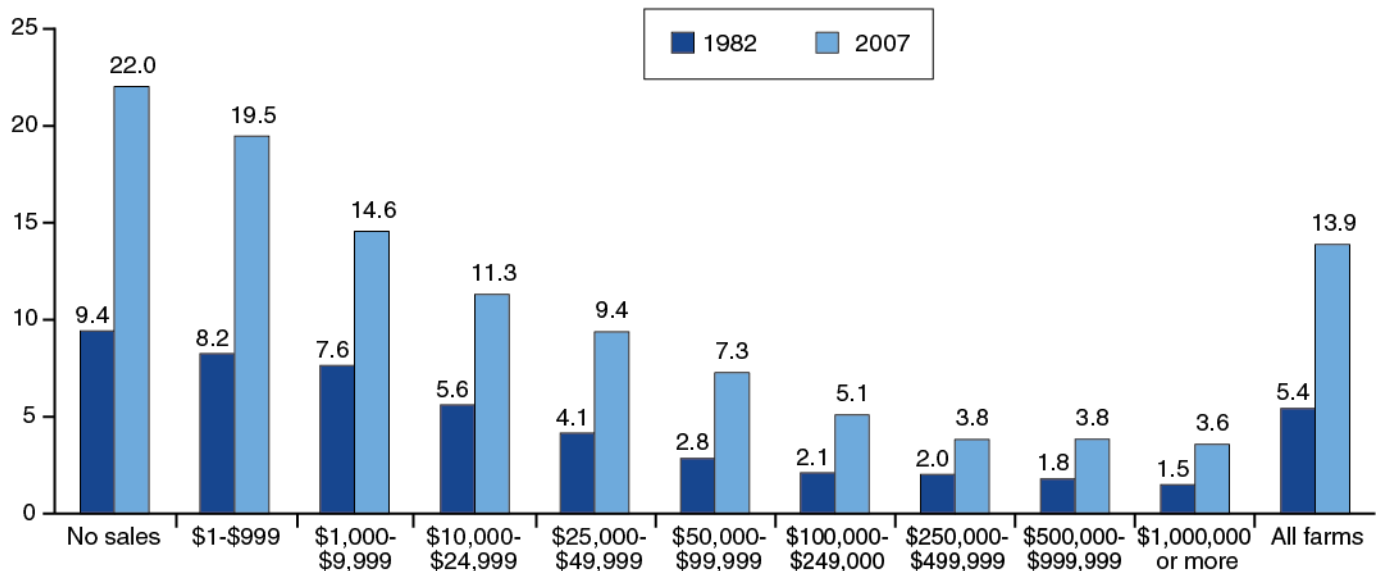
- **Women-operated farms increased in all sales classes.** Between 1982 and 2007, the number of women-operated farms grew from 121,600 to 306,200, with increases in all sales classes (measured in 2007 dollars). In contrast, the number of men-operated farms declined by 220,800, with only the largest and smallest sales classes (\$500,000 or more and less than \$1,000) experiencing growth. Some of the increase in the lower sales classes, however—for both women- and men-operated farms—was due to extensive methodological changes in the Census of Agriculture, introduced over time to include more small farms.
- **Most women-operated farms are very small.** Since 1982, a majority of women-operated farms have had annual sales of less than \$10,000. Most of the growth in the number of women-operated farms occurred in that sales class, increasing from three-fifths of all women-operated farms in 1982 to three-fourths by 2007. In both years, the share of women-operated farms with sales less than \$10,000 was about 20 percentage points more than the share of men-operated farms with sales that low.
- **Five percent of women-operated farms (15,400 farms) had sales of \$100,000 or more in 2007.** Most of these farms specialized in grains and oilseeds, specialty crops, poultry and eggs, beef cattle, or dairy. The poultry and egg specialization alone accounted for roughly half of women-operated farms with sales of \$1 million or more.
- **Nearly half of farms operated by women specialized in grazing livestock.** In 2007, 45 percent of women-operated farms specialized in raising beef cattle other than in feedlots (23 percent), horses and other equines (17 percent), or sheep and goats (6 percent). Most of these farms, however, were very small, accounting for only 16 percent of sales by all women-operated farms.

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## Share of farms and ranches operated by women in each sales class, 1982 and 2007

Women operators increased their share of farms and ranches in all sales classes

Percent of farms in sales class



Note: Sales classes are expressed in constant 2007 dollars, using the Producer Price Index (PPI) for farm products to adjust for price changes.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, compiled from the 1982 and 2007 Censuses of Agriculture.

- **Women-operated farms specializing in poultry, specialty crops, grains, or dairy had the most sales.** Although these farms totaled only 21 percent of women-operated farms, they generated 72 percent of sales from all women's farms.
- **Counting secondary operators increases the number of women farmers to 1 million.** In addition to the principal operator, many farms have one or more secondary operators involved in daily decisions for the farm. When all women operators, principal and secondary, were tallied for the 2007 census, about 1 million were counted as farmers—up from the 306,200 principal operators and totaling 30 percent of all U.S. farmers. Most secondary women farm operators (96 percent) were on farms whose principal operator was a man, generally the woman's husband.

## How Was the Study Conducted?

Using data from the Census of Agriculture, the authors tracked long-term trends for women farm operators and their farms from 1978 (or from 1982 for data items not available from the 1978 census) through 2007, the most recent year available. To examine current characteristics of women-operated farms, the authors used data from the 2007 census. The other major data source for the analysis was the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS), an annual USDA survey jointly conducted by the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS) and the Economic Research Service (ERS). The ARMS provides information not included in the Census of Agriculture about farm finances and the operator's household income and educational attainment.