

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

For the week of: April 19, 2010

American Farm Bureau Federation

Make Sure Rural America Counts

By Dal Grooms

Like school pictures that show how students change and mature from year from year, the U.S. Census Bureau has been documenting the look of America for more than 200 years.

Since 1790, the U.S. has taken a population snapshot, called the decennial census, every 10 years. In the early years, U.S. Marshals rode on horseback gathering information to create a picture of this country. Initially, the information was used to determine state representation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Census numbers are still gathered for that purpose and many others. When all the numbers are processed, data will be used to determine if roads will be built or repaired in your neighborhood. Businesses will make decisions about providing goods to your area, or perhaps even opening a plant because of the workforce available. Governments will census information to decide how tax dollars and services are distributed. And political boundaries for state and federal representation will be determined by the population numbers.

These decisions are important to all Americans. In 2010, they are especially critical to rural Americans. Our time is here again to be noticed in the Census yearbook.

For more than 100 years, we've saw declines in rural populations as cities grew and grew. And some city officials successfully leveraged that trend to persuade the Census Bureau to take targeted counts between the scheduled 10-year dates. Those counts showed many city populations had grown even more than expected, which helped increase the flow of tax dollars.

Now is the time for rural Americans to make sure they stand up and get counted. Anecdotal evidence from the past three years indicates there might be a shift under way that shows rural areas have stabilized in population and some have even grown.

In the 2007 Census of Ag, we saw more new farms and younger farmers returning to the countryside. That indicates young families are coming back to rural areas, and with them, the promise of a growing population.

Recent economic strains across the country may also have led to some population gains in rural areas. Urban relatives hit early and hard by unemployment in high cost-of-living areas have recognized expenses often are more reasonable in rural areas. Many have discovered that supportive rural communities and local bankers are among the first to stand behind local business start-ups, providing opportunities for those who want to pursue the sense of autonomy that rests only in working for yourself.

If you haven't turned your Census form in, census workers will be visiting you soon. Give them the 10 minutes needed to answer the 10 census questions. What you tell them is confidential. However, the essence of that information will shape the picture of America for years to come.