



Community Supported Agriculture farms: national survey results

Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems • UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences • January, 2004

Research Brief #67

After years of innovation and perspiration, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) continues to grow and evolve. A CSA farm raises food for “farm members” who pay at the beginning of the growing season for a share of that season’s produce. Most CSA farms provide primarily vegetables and fruit, but some also include meat, eggs and flowers.

The 1999 National CSA Farm Survey provides the first comprehensive portrait of the CSA movement in the U.S. Researchers from CIAS and other organizations surveyed 825 CSA farmers included in a database compiled by the Robyn Van En Center. Three hundred sixteen farms in 41 states responded to this survey. While they have much in common, these CSA farms also have important differences.

Who are CSA farmers?

The National CSA Farm Survey asked about the ages and farm experiences of up to three individuals involved in owning, managing and operating each CSA farm. The survey looked at the age, years of farming experience, ethnicity, gender and education of these farmers.

CSA farmers tend to be younger than the principal operators of all types of farms in the U.S. (see the graph below). The average age of primary CSA farmers was 43.7 years old—ten years younger than the average of all farmers in the 1997 Census of Agriculture. Second and third CSA farmers tended to be younger than the primary operators.

Furthermore, new farmers are starting CSA farms. In this survey, 43% of primary CSA farm operators had fewer than ten years of farming experience. On average, these primary operators had been CSA farmers for just 5.4 years. Second and third farmers had even fewer years of CSA farming experience.

Almost all CSA farmers identified themselves as White/Non-Hispanic, but gender statistics present a more diverse picture. About 39% of the primary CSA farm operators were female. Even higher percentages of second and third

CSA farmers were female. Only 8.6% of primary operators in the 1997 Census of Agriculture were female. As the Census only designates one operator per farm, it likely underreports the percentage of women involved in farming operations. Still, a much higher percentage of women identify themselves as primary farm operators on CSA farms than in U.S. agriculture in general.

Seventy-seven percent of the primary CSA operators had at least a college degree; nearly 25% had graduate degrees.

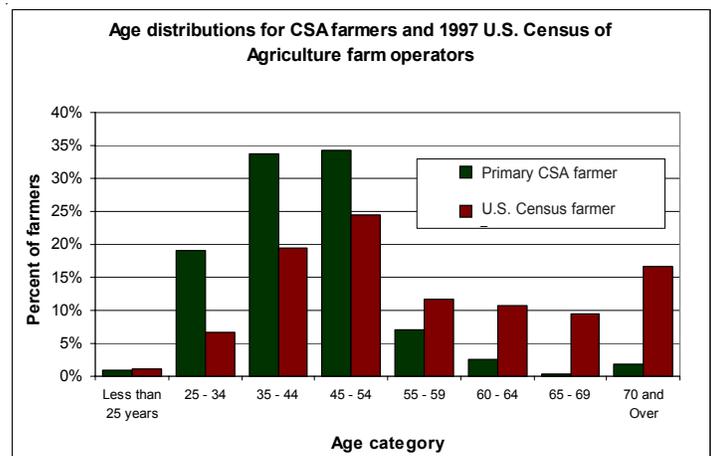
Where are CSA farms located?

The CSA farms responding to this survey tended to be located in northern states, with three dominant regions: the Northeast (where CSA originated in the U.S.), the West Coast, and the North Central Region. Over 70% of the farms responding to this survey were located in twelve states.

What is a typical CSA farm like?

CSA farms are relatively new businesses, averaging 5.5 years in operation. Nearly 75% of the CSA farms had been in business for seven years or less; less than two percent of the farms had been around for more than 15 years.

The CSA farmers participating in this survey owned a median of 14.3 acres of land. (The



researchers used the average whenever feasible. But since an average can be affected by very large or small values, the median or middle value of the data was sometimes used to illustrate a typical CSA farm.) A significant proportion of these farmers owned little or no land. Twenty-seven percent said that they owned zero acres, and another 17% reported owning ten or fewer acres. Many CSA farms must therefore obtain productive land through arrangements such as rental agreements and leases.

Seventy seven percent of farms had fewer than 30 acres of cropland. Nearly 58% used at least half of their land for their CSA operation, and 37% used more than 90% of their land for CSA. Forty-one percent were certified organic, and 94% used organic or biodynamic practices.

The CSA farms in this survey sold a median of 29 large memberships and 23 smaller memberships. Ninety four farms reported selling some kind of “other” membership including home delivery, flower, winter and institutional. The delivery season lasted 23 weeks—or just over five months—on average, reflecting the large proportion of CSA farms in the Northeast and North Central U.S.

The farms participating in this survey earned a median gross income of \$15,000 from CSA. Median gross farm income from all sources including CSA was between \$20,000 and \$29,999. These numbers suggest that most of the farms returning this survey were relatively new and quite small, or had diversified incomes and CSA provided only part of their total earnings. (See *Research Brief* 68 for more details about CSA business management and income.)

What roles do core groups play?

The original CSA model incorporated the idea of a core group of members who help farmers make decisions, gather feedback, find new members and write newsletters. CSA farms were envisioned as community farms, and part of the community’s role was to support the grower beyond the price of membership.

However, 72% of the farms in this survey did not have a core group. Of the farms that had

1999 National CSA Survey research partners

CIAS, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Department of Resource Economics, University of Massachusetts

Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources, Wilson College

core groups, more than half had advisory core groups and the rest had core groups that were more actively involved in farm decisions.

The survey found some interesting differences between farms with and without core groups. Farms with core groups had significantly higher median incomes—nearly \$10,000 higher—than farms without core groups. On average, farms with core groups sold more memberships and charged a higher price for them. These farms were also more likely to organize social and educational events and offer programs to help low-income families become farm members.

How can the future of CSA be built?

CSA farmers are willing to actively help CSA grow. Ninety-nine percent of the farmers responding to this survey were willing to participate in at least one activity to advance the CSA movement. These farmers were willing to provide information to researchers, provide technical assistance, help beginning farmers, and speak to the public about CSA.

This project’s research partners are committed to follow the development of the CSA movement in the U.S. through regular surveys and other research. The 2001 survey is underway. It is hoped that this survey—and future surveys—will encourage research and dialogue to strengthen CSA farming.

Additional survey results are detailed in the report *CSA Across the Nation* and *CIAS Research Brief* 68, available at www.wisc.edu/cias

For more information, contact:

Steve Stevenson, CIAS: (608) 262-5202;
gwsteven@facstaff.wisc.edu

John Hendrickson, CIAS: (608) 265-3704;
jhendric@facstaff.wisc.edu

The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) brings together university faculty, farmers, policy makers, and others to study relationships between farming practices, farm profitability, the environment, and rural vitality. Located in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the UW-Madison, it fosters multidisciplinary inquiry and supports a range of research, curriculum development, and program development projects. For more information on the Center or on the research in this Brief, contact: CIAS, 1450 Linden Drive, UW-Madison, Madison, WI 53706

Phone: (608) 262-5200 Fax: (608) 265-3020 E-mail: ramcnair@wisc.edu, www.wisc.edu/cias

This Research Brief is part of a series. Contact CIAS for other titles. CIAS staff members are grateful for the reviews of this research update by UW-Madison and UW-Extension faculty and CIAS Citizens Advisory Council members. Printed on recycled paper. January, 2004.