

Policy Brief— Population Settlement and Specialty Crop Production in the Northeastern US*

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Agriculture is an integral part of population growth and changes in settlement patterns. This dimension of farm and food production is not always fully appreciated by the general public, mainstream agricultural interests, and political leaders. Moreover, in many cases there is the perception of a rural – urban split that results in conflict and competition for resources and policy assistance. A better understanding of our current agricultural situation and a broader perception of metropolitan agriculture seems important. Today, agriculture is found in both rural and urban locations, but in differing forms and intensities. To help sharpen the debate over high-value agricultural production in metropolitan areas, our research assesses the distribution of specialty crop production in urbanizing areas of the contiguous 48 states. The overriding question is whether specialty crop production still thrives in metro areas, as suggested by USDA research conducted as recently as the early 1980s.

Specialty Crop Production in Metropolitan Areas

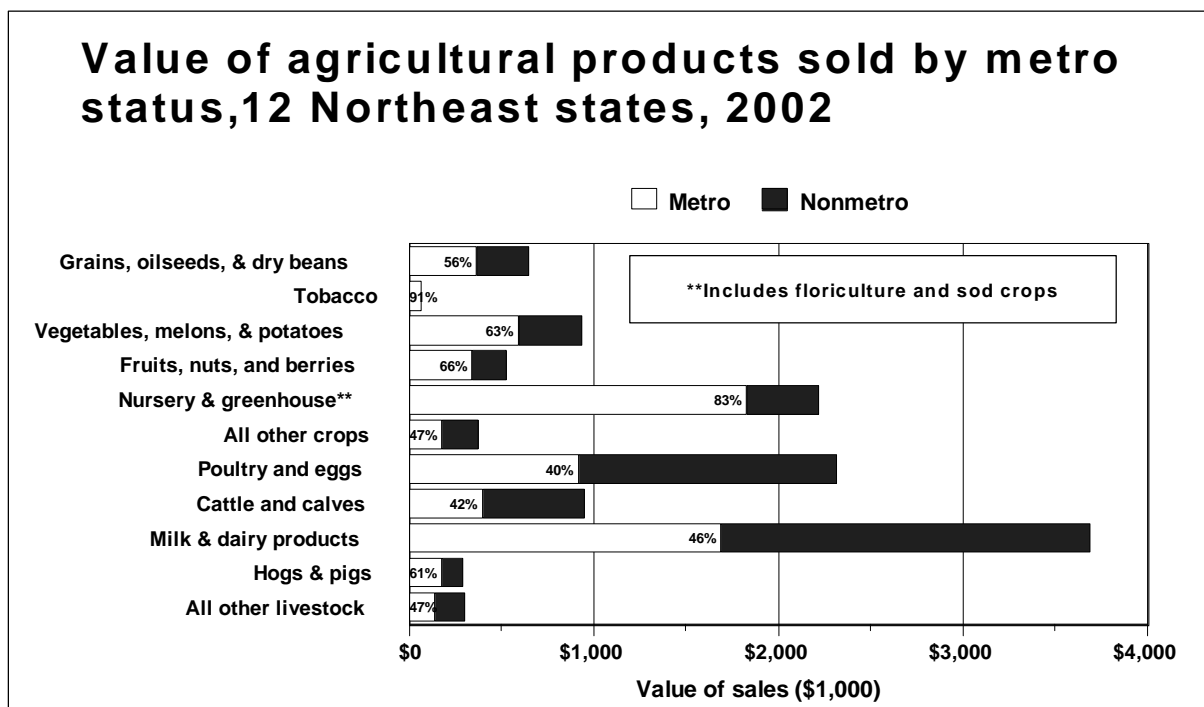
The general characteristics of agricultural production in metropolitan areas are central to specialty crop sectors in US agriculture. Metro farms often specialize in high-value crop production. In 2002, the majority of specialty crop production sales were made by metro farms, including 66% of vegetable sales, 83% of fruit sales, and 75% of nursery and greenhouse product sales. It should be noted that the 2002 Census of Agriculture included sales of potatoes and sweet potatoes in the vegetable sector, which is different from previous Census reports. If potato (and sweet potato) sales could be excluded, the proportion of vegetable sales by metro farms would be even higher, as shown in previous census periods (82% in 1982 and 79% in 1992). Potatoes are an important component of U.S crop production, but potato production is more concentrated in nonmetro areas. Western states produce two-thirds of the fall potato crop, with Idaho and Washington accounting for half of the US total. Therefore, it is understandable that shares of total value of vegetable sales in metro areas are reduced somewhat when sales of potatoes are included. Another agricultural production sector with sales generated mainly by metro farms is equine production (72%). Moreover, agriculture direct sales to consumers (65%) and certified organic production sales (50%) are also mainly attributable to metro farms. Both organic products and direct sales tend to produce higher sales per acre than other agricultural enterprises.

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Many nonmetro counties in some regions are also heavily vested in specialty crop production. In the Northeast, Southeast, Mountain, and Pacific regions, metro areas produce more sales than nonmetro areas. In the Lakes, Appalachian, and Delta regions, nonmetro counties produce more vegetable sales. With respect to fruit production, the top five states are California (63.3 % of U.S total), Florida, Washington, Oregon, and Michigan. Fruit production is concentrated in the Pacific region, accounting for 75% of the US total.

With respect to nursery/greenhouse production, the top five production states are California, Florida, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The distribution of sales of nursery/greenhouse production seems to be homogeneously concentrated in the metro counties across regions. Location plays an important role for nursery/greenhouse crop production. Except for the Southern Plains states, where the Census publishes insufficient data at the county level, our analysis shows that metropolitan counties produce more nursery/ greenhouse sales than nonmetro counties across all regions.



When farms are classified by predominant enterprise, 56% of vegetable and melon farms, 73% of fruit and tree nut farms, and 66% of greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production farms in the US are located in metro counties. Overall, metro counties account for 24% of the nation’s farmland acreage, but 41% of all farms are located there. Moreover, direct sales to consumers (65%) and organic production sales (50%) are also made mainly by metro farms. These agricultural sectors tend to produce higher sales per acre than other agricultural enterprises. In 2002 the majority of specialty crop sales were generated by metro farms, including 66% of vegetable sales, 83% of fruit sales, and 75% of nursery and greenhouse product sales.

A Closer Look at the Northeastern US

Our study was motivated by the economic circumstances confronting commodity agriculture in the Northeast. This Region is the nation's oldest and most densely settled. The 12 Northeast states make up 7% of the land in the 48 contiguous states but account for 21% of the nation's 2005 population (62.3 million); just under 90% of this total population is classified as metropolitan.

Despite high population densities, the 2002 Census of Agriculture shows that the Northeast has nearly 169,000 farms. Considering farm type, based on the farm enterprise accounting for the largest share of commodity sales, about 29,500 (17%) of all farms fall into the specialty crop category. More than 56% of all farms are located in metro counties, but this fraction goes to 69, 60, and 71%, respectively, for farms classified as vegetable, fruit, or nursery/greenhouse operations.

When all crop sales are considered, metropolitan counties account for nearly 75% of total sales in the Northeast. Vegetable sales, including potatoes, are not overrepresented in metropolitan counties compared to all crops — 63% are from farms in metro counties (see figure). Nearly two-thirds (66%) of total fruit sales are generated in metropolitan counties. A wide variety of commodities falls in the fruit category for the Northeast. A predominant category includes numerous tree fruits, but berry and vine crops are important as well, along with such specialties as cranberries and vinifera grapes. About 18% of total farm sales in the Northeast trace to the production of nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod crops; metropolitan counties account for the overriding share (83%) of these commodity sales.

All Northeast states registered appreciable increases in sales of vegetables and nursery/greenhouse products over the time span considered. Values for changes on 10-year interval are erratic on a percentage basis and often reflect sales movement from a relatively small base. Sales of fruit commodities are clearly on a different trajectory in the Northeast compared to other specialty crop categories. Fruit sales reported for 2002 topped \$525 million, but this amount is nearly 7% less than the nominal value reported in the 1992 Census. Important differences occur between states, though. In the Northeast, Maryland and New Jersey registered significant increases over this 10-year period.

Nursery/greenhouse products accounted for nearly a fifth of total farm commodity sales in the Region, and sales increased across the board for these green industries between 1992 and 2002 and for the earlier 1982-1992 interval as well. The overall increase in sales in the 12-state Region during the 1990s amounted to 65%; the corresponding percentage change during the 1980s was 89%.

Overall, it is clear from our analysis that specialty crop production continues to thrive in metropolitan areas, in both the US and in the Northeast. Thus, the continued competitiveness of specialty crop production is a key issue in maintaining a viable agriculture in rapidly urbanizing areas.