

Ohio Maple Syrup No Longer Part of USDA Reporting

Well if you have ever received a commodity production survey from the United States Department of Agriculture – National Agricultural Statistical Service (USDA-NASS), hopefully you filled it out and returned it. If you have attended even one of the last 6 to 8 years of the Ohio Maple Days workshops you have heard either I and/or Ms. Cheryl Turner from Ohio USDA-NASS talk about the importance of having good tracking and reporting production numbers.

We have been warning that if Ohio maple did not show better production numbers for the state we could be dropped from the system. Well it has happened! Ohio and five other states (CT, IN, MA, MN, WV) have been dropped from maple syrup production reporting (see table 1). I have been told this could be permanent or a one-year drop for now and may be back next year. Time will tell.

Table 1: States maple syrup production tracked and those dropped from NASS reporting.

Maple Syrup		
State	Annual Estimates	States Removed From Program
Maine	P	Connecticut
Michigan	P	Indiana
New Hampshire	P	Massachusetts
New York	P	Minnesota
Pennsylvania	P	Ohio
Vermont	P	West Virginia
Wisconsin	P	

How did this happen?

Commodity production numbers are gathered annually and through a census conducted every 5 years. The biggest difference under the census is that NASS tries to reach a much larger number of producers and asks more questions. After every census NASS reevaluates all commodities and eliminates the ones that are under reporting in an effort to spend their limited resources (money & people) on those commodities that have higher return rates.

Starting with the 2019 maple production report NASS kept the top seven reporting states, Ohio's reported production was 8th in the system. This is not the first time for maple production to be dropped. After the 2012 Census there was talk of dropping all maple syrup production reporting across the entire U.S.

The New England field office of NASS in Concord, NH has been organizing and reporting maple production. Their original focus was on New England states. Prior to 1992 their maple production was published for just 6 states (CT, ME, MA, NH, VT, NY). Starting with the 1992 New England report they included five new states (OH, MI, MN, PA, WI). In 2016 Indiana and West Virginia were added to the New England report.

Prior to Ohio being included in the New England report, maple production numbers were collected by NASS and were reported typically by the Ohio Department of Agriculture in their yearly reports. However, in the years of 1982, 1983, and 1991 there was no maple production recorded for Ohio.

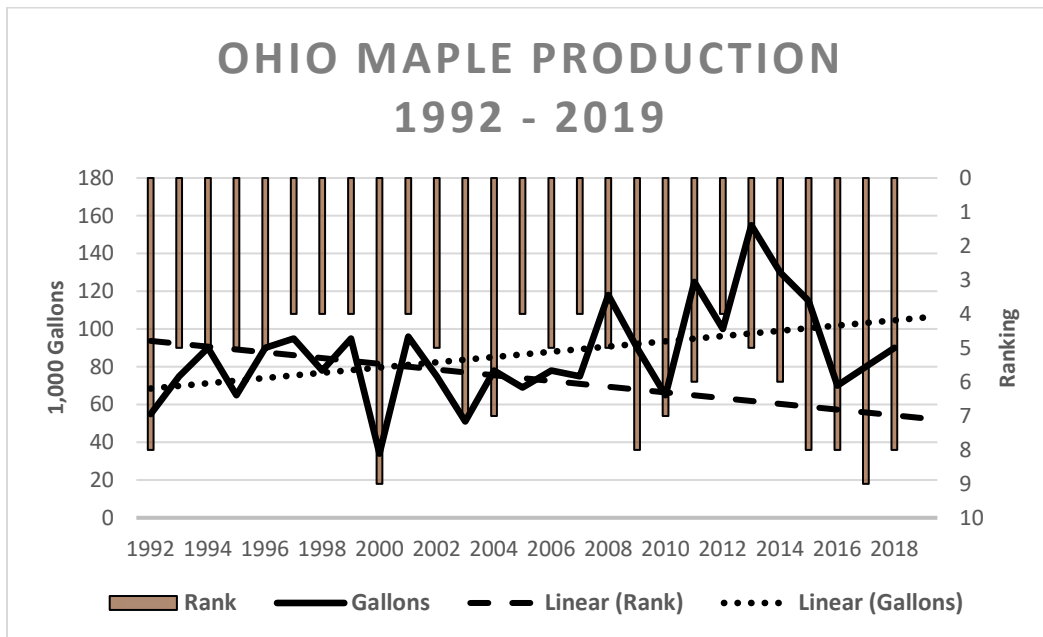
In 2001, Ohio was ranked as the 4th largest producer in the United States with 96,000 gallons. The reported value was \$2.7 million and at that time, the number of taps was not reported. From the early 2000's to late 2000's Ohio bounced from 4th to 8th (5.6 average) out of all reporting states. Ten years ago (2008) Ohio reported 118,000 gallons produced from 395,000 taps and this ranked them in 5th place. In 2018 Ohio reported 90,000 gallons from 400,000 taps and were ranked 8th. Remember that 2018 was also a low production years due to the weather conditions across the state.

The last 10-years I have witnessed a lot of growth within the Ohio maple industry and other states. When consulting with equipment dealers, they are selling a lot more equipment. Moreover, dealers are selling a lot of tubing. It is no secret, but with tubing and vacuum, the production over buckets can go from a quart per tap to ½ gallon to ¾ gallon per tap. This means if that much tubing is coming into Ohio the production numbers should be increasing accordingly. Production is increasing, but if that production is reported is another question.

Production in Ohio is on the rise yet our ranking is going down. The pivot point is after 2000. The information in Graph 1 should help explain what has been happening in Ohio from 1992 to 2018. The bars coming down from the chart top indicates Ohio's ranking among the 13 states in the current New England report (see key on right side of graph). The solid line indicates the thousands of gallons of syrup produced with the key on the left side of the graph.

There are also two linear lines on the graph. You will notice that the light dotted line shows the linear increase in gallons produced. The heavier dashed line shows the linear digression of Ohio's ranking from 1992 to 2018. You will notice that these two linear lines cross in 2000. See Graph 1.

Graph1: Ohio gallons syrup produced and ranking 1992-2018



Why the digression?

The year before I started with the Ohio State Maple Syrup Program and the Ohio Maple Days workshops, a speaker from ODA was trying to get a better handle on the maple production of Ohio. I have heard her concept was good, however her approach was not and this upset a lot of producers in attendance. I have been told they physically took back information sheets they had handed in and walked away as they lost trust in the reporting agencies.

Then in 2004 with my Doctorial research I discovered in the 620 responding producers that production reported to me for the two years requested (2003-2004) were higher than NASS reported for the same years. There are several plausible reasons for this. A total of 10% of my returns were from hobbyist or less than 250 taps and NASS does not count operations with less than 250 taps.

I also found 25% of the survey return population were Amish and the majority indicated they had greater than 1,000 taps. They also indicated that they did not participate in government programs like NASS. It is not just Amish who are reluctant to report. It is a wide spread issue. I link it back to in the 1800's when Ohio became a state under the "Home Rule" status. People moved here to get away from the more restrictive control in the original 13 colonies and Ohio was the edge of wild western frontier at the time. Each year at my Ohio Maple Days Workshops, I have a small survey to gather info to help with the next years program. I get some very interesting answers as to why people do not report to NASS. From "I did not know about it" to "none of their business" or "my eyes only."

Maple production is a cash based endeavor, I understand and respect this very much. Producers do not want anyone to know the amount of cash in their business for fear the IRS will come “take” their share. This is by far the biggest false belief about reporting to NASS. People have said to me “if you report to NASS then the IRS will know what you make and come after your maple money.” This is wrong, absolutely wrong. NASS and the IRS do not share data. As Cheryl Turner from Ohio NASS says, “we at NASS do not play well in the sand box because we do not share anything with anyone, even our sister agencies.” She explains this is the only way NASS can keep commodity producers trust by not releasing any personal information about their operations. In fact when you read a NASS report and see a letter or symbol instead of data this is done as there was not enough information and reporting it would have been able to be linked to those producers in that county.

Why does it matter to report?

I actually used to not like this question because I just wanted to say because it is what a responsible producer should do. Yet I know that is not a good answer for an anti-agency skeptic. Now when asked why they should care about it I will ask back “do you use tubing and vacuum, or a cleaner or an evaporator?” Of which the typical response is “well yea I am a maple producer.” I then say “did you know the groups who provided the research dollars used to study maple production tools and methods use NASS numbers to determine how much money they will give.”

At the meetings this year I had a producer at the Geauga meeting say “so why is it so important that I report” to NASS. I said did any of you learn anything during Dr. Tim Perkins talks today? (Hands shot up in the air). I said if you liked it, learned something, and have better ideas of what to do at your operation it is because research dollars paid for it. Dollars that came from sources that look at the production numbers from USDA-NASS. Grantors do not want to invest money into industries that appear to be stagnate or showing indications of dying. It is not a good investment on their part. They want their contributions to expand growth not sustain an industry.

Like it or not the NASS production numbers are what government agencies and private organizations utilized in determining what to give the most attention and funding toward. Even Universities use the production numbers to allocate dollars for personnel like me. Growth of an industry equates to more dollars for research and personnel. When I started in 2001 there were 21 full and part-time Extension personnel with maple responsibilities in the United States, plus a dozen University researched based folks. Today there are two full-time and four part-time Extension based personnel in the United States with maple production responsibilities. The number of maple specific related researchers has also dropped.

An example close to home is that an educational maple operation is being established at the OSU Marion campus. They would like to conduct some basic maple related research but need research dollars to do so. However, the last five years Ohio's reported maple production has been on a downhill slide, a train wreck so to speak. Even though the production was up despite several bad weather years, and there were more producers, the reported numbers showed an industry that was dyeing. What are OSU Marion's chances of getting research dollars? A lot less than it was last year due in part to the issues of reporting being discussed here. Will there still be maple related research dollars and maple grants available? Yes there will just be less and more competitive. You may like to think it will have no impact on you and your operation but it will. Without unbiased researched based knowledge, producers will be at the mercy of untested claims and half-truths. The internet is full of them. Just Google maple production sometime and see all the wacky stuff out there people claim to be the next best thing to hit the maple world. All without valid research to back it up. Regardless how you feel about it the lack of production numbers in Ohio shows a dying industry.

Other states have seen bad production years like Ohio. They have also seen the increase in taps and production reported. The main reason for this is that many other states Department of Agriculture have enacted registration processes for food production to aid in requirements that came out of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FMSA). Ohio Department of Agriculture is doing more in the vegetable production sector than before they just have not done the same thing in maple production yet.

Seeing the impacts of registration on maple production is extremely evident in Wisconsin. Starting back in 2008 under the FMSA guidelines Wisconsin Department of Ag started the first stage of a registration process for multiple commodities including maple syrup. Between 2008 and 2009 there was a 130,000 tap increase and a 50,000 gallon production increase. In 2013 when the full implementation of the registration process enacted there was a total of 740,000 taps reported and 265,000 gallons reported. Just since 2007 there has been a 91% increase in taps and 135% increase in gallons produced. This is not a true picture as the taps were always there they just were not being reported. The outcome now is that Wisconsin is now looking to hire a maple syrup specialist to help the industry with its educational and research needs. Can you imagine the numbers Ohio would produce if we had that system. I know where there are 100,000 taps in a couple townships that are never counted. Multiply that across the entire state and Ohio would be back to its number 4 ranking easy.

So what did the 2017 Census reveal?

The 2017 Census report was released on April 11. I will also post it and several of the key maple sections on my maple web page for your access. <https://holmes.osu.edu/maple> What the census showed is that from 2012 to 2017 Ohio had an additional 112 maple operations from the 708 reporting in 2012 Census. The 820 operations reporting in 2017 indicated an additional

26,367 taps were in production since the last census. This coincides with the data I have gathered with the Ohio Maple Days questionnaire. On average, producers indicated expansion in the last 5 years in the tune of 28,000 (2015) to 43,000 (2019). These are new taps in production not those already in production. This increase in taps was from a less than half of the 300 people in attendance. Only about 40% of attendees return the questionnaire. Imagine if all 300 people returned the questionnaire what the number of increased taps would be.

The census showed 47 counties indicating an increase in operations and production and 22 indicating a decrease. Also six showed no change and 19 had no production report at all. The three counties that host the Ohio Maple Days Workshops were as follows: Morrow Co. decreased in producers reporting but increased in taps in production. Holmes Co. increased number of operations and taps in production, Geauga Co. decreased in operations reporting but increased number of taps in production. Check out my web site for more census information and a link to the complete 2017 USDA-NASS Census.

What you can do now?

Start by educating yourself in the issue. Former NASS New England office director Gary Keough had a very good article in the October 2016 issue of the Maple Digest on how NASS conducts their surveys. In May of 2018 I had an article in the Maple Digest titled "Reporting to USDA-NASS." Both cover the how and why it is important to report. If you missed either of these articles I will be sure to post them on my work web page incase you would like to read them. They will be in the 2017 Census resources at <https://holmes.osu.edu/maple>

Is it over or is there hope? I am not a quitter and so I have to have hope that this is a one-year deletion and that maple production will be back next year. So my advice, is talk to your area State and Federal representatives about how you are upset that maple was dropped from the records. Indicate to them the importance of getting this back into the system so research dollars are obtainable to help this growing industry. NASS is still sending out maple surveys so when you get it, please fill it out completely and send it back. By sending it back just maybe, Ohio will have a maple report next year. Fill it out completely knowing there is NO connection between reporting production to NASS and the IRS getting more money out of you. By The IRS has enough tools to do this it is not through reporting maple syrup production.

Finally, there is no one person to blame, nor should NASS be blamed, for the cancelation of maple production reporting. NASS does a great job of managing the astronomical amount of commodity data they are responsible for each year. They can only report if producers do their part and report their data. They also do not know where all the maple producers are because we do not have a registration requirement in maple as all other food-producing industries in Ohio have. The OMPA board and I are extremely upset over this and I have been working hard for years to not have this happen, but it is out of our control. OMPA is going to write letters

and encourages you let your legislators know how you feel. It is a sad day for Ohio maple and all maple producers across the United States.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dr. Gary Graham, Ohio State University