

Reporting to USDA NASS

By: Dr. Gary Graham, Ohio State University Extension

Research I conducted in 2004 revealed higher taps and production volumes than the 2004 United State Department of Agriculture – National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) report. This started my interest in obtaining more realistic maple syrup production numbers for Ohio. Ms. Cheryl Turner, State Statistician, USDA/NASS Ohio, has been on the same path to better reporting as well. NASS does a good job of working with the maple production data they receive which is a sampling of the total maple producers within a state.

Gary Keough, State Statistician, for NASS's New England Field Office wrote a very good article in the October 2016 Maple Syrup Digest, entitled "Are NASS Maple Surveys Underestimating Production?" This explains how the data is formulated. Mr. Keough goes on to say this: "The criticism where I have to admit that we probably are underestimating taps and production is that we don't have all the maple producers on our list." At the articles end it explains that the producer provided information is kept confidential by Law, Title 7 of the U.S. Code, which states that NASS data cannot "be disclosed to any other governmental agency or private entity".

I do not know how we can educate more on the importance of reporting production and the benefits to the industry and individuals when fighting an unjustified mistrust of any government agency, not just NASS. For the last three years, the Ohio State University Extension Maple Syrup Production Program has collaborated with Ohio NASS to reach more producers at the annual OSU Extension Ohio Maple Days (OMD) workshops. This collaboration not only aims to reach a larger audience, but also educate producers on the importance of reporting in addition to putting the unjustified rumors and misconceptions to rest. I have no way to know if this partnership has helped with NASS reporting. It does help to understand producer's stance on NASS surveys.

Ms. Turner is very approachable and tells it straight in saying: "NASS does not play well in the sand box with others. We do not share data with any other federal agencies." In fact, within the NASS State office only a couple people have the authority or ability to access the data which connects personal names to production numbers. The personnel formulizing data never see names and data together. The fear that NASS and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) are sitting at the same table, or that reporting to NASS will put you on the radar of all governmental agencies, could not be further from the truth. Yet this is the envisioned concept by many. I also believe after this collaboration that the mistrust associated with reporting to NASS is not warranted. With 2017 being a Census year, hopefully NASS will obtain more results, but it will still not reach all maple producers. Issues arise in that too many operations are not even known to even exist, so there is no way to count them.

Looking at a Three-Year Trend on Reporting to USDA-NASS Production Surveys

For the last 17 years at the OMD workshops a short 10 to 12 question anonymous questionnaire is utilized to help learn who is attending and how I can better serve them with future outreach efforts. For the years of 2016, 2017, and 2018 the same question was asked of participants attending to determine their response rates to the NASS maple production survey process. The following data is an analysis of responses to the two questions:

- 1) Do you report maple syrup production to USDA-NASS? (Yes/No)
- 2) If you "Do Not" report, please explain "Why".

Note: The participants from year to year at the meetings are not always the same, nor is it tracked as to who returns their questionnaire, so no reference can be drawn between the three years.



Over the three years there were 810 workshop participants with 44% (N=358) returning their questionnaires. Of the 358 returned, 90% (n=323) answered the two-part question on reporting to NASS surveys. Only 10% did not indicate either way or answer the questions. What was observed is that the OMD participants are split down the middle on the issues of responding to NASS surveys. With 52% answering “Yes” to responding and 48% answering “No” to responding to NASS surveys (See Table 1).

Table 1: Question: Do you report maple syrup production to USDA-NASS? (Yes/No)

Totals N=323	“Yes” Report	% “Yes”	“No” Report	% “No”	% Indicating “Why Not”
2018 n=92	57	62%	35	38%	80%
2017 n=124	64	52%	60	48%	87%
2016 n=107	44	41%	63	59%	97%
Totals	165		158		
Average		52%		48%	88%

Note: Only 358 (44%) of total participants (N=810) returned questionnaires with 323 (90%) answering the questions.

Of those responding “No to reporting” 88% indicated “Why” they do not report. Examining the “Why” a respondent does not report is interpretive. Some of the responses are from operations whom are below NASS’s cutoff level to survey (less than 100 taps) or some never knew of it or received a survey. Others though are direct with their reasons as to “Why” they do not report. A sampling of these responses are: “none of their business;” “no reason to do it;” “for our eyes only;” “nothing in it for me;” “I don’t want to;” “Don’t give out that information.” Then there are those that admit they need to do a better job of returning the surveys by indicating: “I don’t take the time;” “didn’t know how important it was;” “will try to do better.” There were also a number of responses indicating it is just too difficult, confusing and/or time consuming to do the entire report. Several indicated they would respond if they could just return the maple questions. If producers returned the NASS survey with just the maple production portion filled out, NASS would gladly accept it as that’s better than nothing at all.

How Much of the State’s Production Am I Reaching?

Knowing my producers as I do, I know that some of the larger operations do not return my questionnaire even though it is completely anonymous. I know this as two questions I ask every year are: the “number of taps currently within the operation” and the “number of taps added in the last 5 years”. If the larger producers returned their questionnaire my “taps present” at the Ohio workshops would be much higher than is reported in Table 2. I ask these questions to get a feel for size of operations attending and how many of the overall taps reported by NASS were present at the workshops for developing future training materials.

Table 2: Responses to Taps in Production Reported by Ohio Maple Days Workshop Participants - 2016-2018

Taps Reported	2018	Responses to question/Total attendance	2017	Responses to question/Total attendance	2016	Responses to question/Total attendance
Total @ OMD	121,448	109/301	134,589	137/268	102,182	113/241
NASS Reported	(1)	*	400,000	*	370,000	*
% @ OMD	(1)	*	34%	*	28%	*

** Not Applicable*

(1) NASS Maple Production report will be posted June 2018

What Happens Now?

A simplistic answer is more NASS surveys need to be sent out and more producers need to respond to the surveys, yet this is easier said than done. I understand the “why” in a largely “cash-based” enterprise that “flying-under-the-radar” is the normal operating procedure. Somehow reporting production is looked upon as a negative. Yet, realistically it is a positive as showing strength in numbers always gives any issue more power. Power in promotion, in obtaining research grants and producer equipment upgrade grants, demand for product, market potential and yes income in pockets. I challenge each producer to complete and submit their NASS surveys and be counted because it really does matter. This applies to all maple producing states not just Ohio.

It must also be understood that with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) enacted, flying under the radar is not going to fly anymore. The 911 attacks against our Country did not cause FSMA, it just awoke the sleeping dog within the Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, which became the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002. The 2002 Bioterrorism Act then became the 2011 Food Safety Modernization Act or “FSMA”. Producers may be able to fly under the radar and produce a product, but if they want to sell that product they are going to have to accept that we live in a different world today. Food safety is at the forefront of attention and it’s not going to go away, nor the paperwork that accompanies it.

With FDA registrations and some States’ Department of Agriculture implementing a registration processes being counted is part of doing business. It’s possible it will push some folks out of production, but it does not need to, it will be their choice to quit. Recordkeeping and accountability are part of the “new normal” of any entity especially concerning food. I would not be doing my job of educating producers if I did not help prepare them for what needs to become the “new” standard operating procedures. The message is not liked and some let me know of it. They fail to realize that it is not me or the Maple industry pushing the issues onto producers. Rather we all are working hard to keep the industry strong, growing and to keep producers out of “sticky situations.”

