



United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service

LEARNING AGENDA

FY 2024 - 2026



Interim Learning Agenda

FY2024 – FY2026

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Introduction

The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is working to develop a multi-year learning agenda in alignment with guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and its FY2022 – FY2026 Strategic Plan. The strategic plan is anchored around three strategic goals, workforce transformation, exceptional customer service, and organizational excellence. These goals align not only with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) objectives to enhance customer service, improve data accessibility, and modernize IT infrastructure, but they also serve as the cornerstone of NASS's future vision. The learning agenda is intended to foster evidence-based decision-making, improve program effectiveness, and ensure strategic alignment within the agency.

In adherence to the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), NASS has developed a learning agenda to guide future program evaluation endeavors. This interim learning agenda identifies key research and evaluation questions that encapsulate NASS's mission and strategic vision for 2026, ensuring a cohesive approach towards evidence-based decision-making and program effectiveness. Underpinning these efforts is a framework of leadership roles, including the Chief Data Officer (CDO), Chief Statistical Officer (CSO), and the newly established Strategic Planning and Business Service Division (SPBSD), all dedicated to steering NASS towards evidence-based practices and strategic alignment.

Acknowledging the crucial need for evidence-based practices, NASS is undertaking steps to establish a program evaluation and evidence-building function. This initiative, bolstered by collaboration with key stakeholders such as the USDA Evaluation Officer and the Research, Economics, and Education (REE) mission area Strategic Planning, Program Evaluation & Enterprise Risk Officer, underscores NASS's commitment to transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement. Through the dissemination of evaluation findings and the iterative refinement of its learning agenda and strategic plan, NASS will remain resolute in its pursuit of excellence, striving to leverage available resources efficiently and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

The timeline to complete learning agenda activities will vary according to data availability, staff resources, existing internal processes, including strategic planning sessions, and prioritization of work efforts. The timing of activities is intended to coincide with the timeline of the Agency's Strategic Plan. The Learning Agenda will be reviewed annually and updated as needed.

Stakeholder Engagement

NASS engaged key stakeholders in developing the interim Learning Agenda to ensure a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Internal and external collaboration helped NASS refine and expand key questions, promoting transparency in the process. Some questions may require engagement with external researchers or stakeholders due to data availability outside the agency. In such cases, NASS is open to sharing its data with external researchers interested in NASS's research questions, aligning with shared priorities and implications beyond the agency's scope.

Employee input was gathered through interviews, correspondence, and meetings to define key questions and gather program feedback. To enhance this process, NASS plans to establish an Evidence and Evaluation Community of Practice to facilitate ongoing communication, education, and training on evaluation practices. The agency also reports quarterly on key performance indicators and plans to delve deeper into program performance reviews.

NASS staff responsible for program evaluation will conduct learning agenda sessions with NASS leadership and issue annual guidance to solicit feedback for new evidence-building projects. Collaboration with key internal stakeholders like the Senior Executive Team (SET), Strategic Planning Council (SPC), and the Business Council (BC) remains integral to this process.

Externally, NASS will seek input through channels like the Federal Register Notice, USDA Data Users meetings, and engagement with commodity organizations, agricultural trade groups, and community-based organizations. Stakeholder feedback includes perspectives from farmers, ranchers, USDA officials, researchers, and various industry representatives. Additionally, NASS benefits from inputs gathered through forums, advisory committees, public comment requests, and meetings with producer groups, ensuring a well-rounded and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement.

Learning Agenda Framework

NASS structured its Learning Agenda around the three strategic goals outlined in the *FY2022-2026 Strategic Plan* by identifying key research questions aligned with the strategic objectives to gather evidence and promote continuous learning. The interim learning agenda provides a list of key research and evaluation questions along with methods and data for evidence building for each strategic objective. The evidence building activities are intended to help answer priority questions in the final learning agenda and will continue to build a suite of evidence to inform decision-making.

The FY2022-2026 Strategic Goals are:

1. **Workforce Transformation** – Foster a workforce to meet current and emerging needs.
2. **Exceptional Customer Experience** – Proactively strengthen relationships with data users, providers, and partners.
3. **Organizational Excellence** – Operate as a strategic, integrated, efficient organization built on sound management practices and methodological principles.

The Evidence Act ensures that the questions in the learning agenda account for various agency priorities, including regulations and policies. It categorizes questions as short-term or long-term and identifies those suitable for external engagement. Short-term questions can be addressed through rapid iterative testing, existing data analysis, or literature review. Long-term questions aid NASS in understanding

intermediate or long-term outcomes, multi-stage evidence building, or factors influenced by external forces. NASS also includes strategic questions in the learning agenda to assess program performance, such as those related to customer satisfaction, which may initially be answered quickly but require ongoing monitoring for long-term insights. In the future, the results will be published on the NASS website (<https://www.nass.usda.gov>), and findings will be incorporated into a NASS performance management framework and strategic plan to inform long-term strategy.

Strategic Goal 1: Workforce Transformation

Foster a workforce to meet current and emerging needs.

NASS's long-term success is rooted in the hard work and dedication of a highly skilled workforce. Supporting transformational initiatives requires that the organization clearly identify capabilities, competencies, and emerging skills. NASS will continue to leverage the efforts of the FY21 Organizational Analysis and the FY22 Workforce Transformation Team to implement specific recommendations aligned with fostering a workforce that meets current and emerging trends. NASS plans to address the following questions about these efforts:

Key Research and Evaluation Questions:

Short-term priority questions:

- How can NASS foster a work culture that cultivates leadership development and supports its mission in the evolving work environment?

Long-term priority questions:

- Is NASS staffed at a level to support the broad spectrum of programs required to meet the needs of its data users?
- Do staff have the skills necessary to support the broad spectrum of programs required to meet the needs of its data users?
- What is the effect on NASS programs and published statistics due to loss of agency staff and experience over the past 10 years?

Methods and Data for evidence-building:

Objective 1.1: Increase employee professional growth and development, satisfaction, engagement, and innovative thoughts through a workforce that is reflective of the American people.

NASS will develop a central hub for all employees to promote communications, knowledge transfer, and remote work support. The employee engagement site will provide resources specifically tailored to the needs of NASS employees. NASS is also committed to applying the Federal Employees Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) as a key tool for evidence-building. By leveraging FEVS data, NASS aims to develop comprehensive reports that track employee growth, development, and engagement. This data will enable NASS to identify training opportunities at all levels and implement feedback and success surveys at various stages of learning. NASS plans to conduct annual needs assessments to ensure that evolving organizational requirements are addressed effectively. Additionally, NASS will adopt best practices and implement system changes to foster a work environment that is safe, respectful, inclusive, and free from harassment. With a focus on cross-collaboration among leaders and employees, NASS intends to create a culture of experience and support data-driven decision-making, ensuring everyone can perform at their best.

Objective 1.2: Appropriately size, recruit, and train the workforce.

NASS will adopt future-of-work strategies that align with the evolving landscape to effectively oversee and implement staff, operations, and program delivery in a hybrid environment. By implementing the FY2021 - FY2025 Human Capital Management Plan, NASS will execute data-driven recruiting, hiring, attrition, and retirement analysis, while upskilling the current workforce. Furthermore, NASS will strategically utilize existing alternative hiring sources, such as scholars' programs, experienced worker programs, and other special hiring authorities to build diverse talent pipelines capable of meeting the agency's growing talent needs. By establishing clear measures of success, NASS can track progress and demonstrate an increase in workforce transition targets over a five-year period, ensuring the agency remains agile and effective in its mission.

Objective 1.3: Develop strategic workforce planning capabilities to support transition from traditional survey data collection to in-depth integration of survey data with alternative sources and methods.

NASS is committed to using strategic workforce planning tools, including predictive functions and dashboards, to provide our leaders with accurate information about full-time employees (FTE) numbers, occupations, and competencies. By integrating these data-driven methods, NASS can make informed decisions that align staffing with organizational goals and support our transition from traditional survey data collection to a comprehensive integration of survey data with alternative sources and methods. Regularly assessing our recruitment and selection practices ensures they meet current workforce skill requirements, while developing partnerships and improved outreach strategies increases access to essential workforce development opportunities. This enables NASS to build a skilled team capable of navigating the complexities of modern data collection and analysis.

Strategic Goal 2: Exceptional Customer Experience

Proactively strengthen relationships with data users, providers, and partners.

NASS has long prided itself on the close attention it pays to its customers, cooperators, and stakeholders. This is supported by "Good" scores on the American Customer Satisfaction Index NASS has participated in several times since 2008. However, customer expectations have risen in perpetuity with the technological advances of the last few decades. Similarly, private industry has been able to use new technologies to create more sophisticated value-added products.

Key Research and Evaluation Questions:

Short-term priority questions:

- How can NASS utilize alternative data sources and existing historical datasets to reduce the burden of data collection and enhance their data products?
- How is NASS proactively adapting its programs and products to address evolving future needs and align with public policy to better serve its customers?
- In what ways can NASS programs better utilize stakeholder feedback and expertise?

Long-term priority questions:

- How can NASS improve the accessibility and dissemination of its data and research activities to a wider stakeholder audience more effectively?

- What are the most effective methods for determining and prioritizing data needs and research to support USDA partner agencies?
- How does NASS leverage its geospatial program to meet new data users demand and support stakeholders?
- What is the impact of NASS state-level projects on our relationships with data users, providers, and partners?
- How well does the NASS program support rural economic development and open competitive markets?
- How can NASS programs effectively address data gaps in urban agriculture, agroforestry, subsistence farming, hydroponics, and other small-scale but high value agricultural activities?

Methods and Data for Evidence Building:

Objective 2.1: Incorporate new data sources and data collection techniques to reduce respondent burden and increase sample representation, while maintaining confidentiality and privacy.

NASS will utilize a human centered approach to enhance our interactive portal, providing survey respondents a pathway to respond to surveys and conduct business with other USDA agencies securely through farmers.gov authentication. AS NASS continues to assess the potential to integrate precision agricultural and satellite imagery into business processes, NASS seeks to develop data products using alternative data sources without increasing respondent burden. Additionally, NASS will implement new business processes for surveys and data products to include a step to review administrative and other sources of data before any new data collection effort.

Objective 2.2: Increase effectiveness of stakeholder engagement.

NASS aims to reshape our interactions with stakeholders at both local and national levels by implementing an expanded customer-centric public affairs strategy. Our focus is on providing easily accessible and understandable data, which is crucial for helping the agricultural community make better informed decisions. To achieve this, NASS will integrate coordinated stakeholder engagement, outreach, and customer feedback as standard practices in process improvements and program delivery efforts. NASS is also exploring ways to modify existing systems or create new systems to effectively capture and analyze customer interactions across NASS, ensuring our strategies are responsive to stakeholder needs. By participating in customer satisfaction surveys such as Foresee and the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), NASS continually assesses our performance and strive to maintain an ACSI score that exceeds the government average. Additionally, NASS will implement storytelling training for staff to enhance their ability to communicate complex information clearly and engagingly.

Objective 2.3: Raise the awareness of and use of NASS products and services.

NASS endeavors to make our data more accessible and useful by enhancing our customer's ability to search, visualize, and interface with statistical and geographic information. NASS continues to develop digital products specifically designed to reach underserved and hard-to-reach populations, removing barriers to participation, and actively engaging rural farming communities in NASS events. To further support these efforts, NASS is streamlining program policies and modernizing application systems, which will reduce barriers, increase access, and improve the overall customer experience. Through these initiatives, NASS strives to ensure that all agricultural stakeholders can effectively utilize NASS's resources and insights.

Strategic Goal 3: Organizational Excellence

Operate as a strategic, integrated, efficient organization built on sound management practices and methodological principles.

NASS continues to explore the use of new business processes, methodologies, and technologies aiming for faster and more efficient data collection to output quality data with greater speed and relevance. These methodologies and technologies show promise in improving and enhancing the measurements of the agricultural economy and community without imposing additional respondent burden.

Key Research and Evaluation Questions:

Short-term priority questions:

- What metrics can the agency monitor to evaluate the effectiveness of its modernization efforts?

Long-term priority questions:

- What are the effects of changes in sampling methods and data collection practices on data accuracy and reliability?
- How can NASS use its vast amount of data to add value to products beyond what it currently offers?
- What are the impacts of NASS program and products change on data quality, stakeholder engagement, and operational efficiency?
- What is the impact of NASS research activities and products on census and estimates programs?
- What is the return on investment (ROI) and the outcomes of adopting CAPI and CASI data collection tools?
- How well does NASS specialty crops and livestock estimates inform nutrition security and assistance?

Methods and Data for Evidence building:

Objective 3.1: Create new, modern business processes to produce quality data and products at a faster rate.

NASS will adopt enterprise cloud platforms to enable greater access to data for collaboration, enhanced analytics and reporting capabilities, and new data sharing capabilities with external stakeholders and researchers. NASS plans to transition from duplicative legacy applications to enterprise-level solutions for data collection editing, and dissemination. Additionally, NASS will expand business processes to think beyond the traditional survey lifecycle toward a broader information lifecycle model using survey and non-survey data.

Objective 3.2: Mature, expand, and enforce enterprise-level strategic and program management processes and tools to guide data-driven decision-making.

To enhance project management and operational efficiency, NASS will conduct a gap analysis of project management artifacts and create templates and end-to-end project administration manual, followed by staff training. The organization will assess and document existing business

processes to ensure they are repeatable, integrated, and scalable, supporting strategic goals and objectives. Lean methods and continuous improvement techniques will be adopted, alongside investments in methodologies and technologies for record linkage, quality assessment, data management, and modern disclosure limitations and security procedures.

Objective 3.3: Mature ability to manage risk and ensure that proven effective internal controls are built into every process and system.

NASS will leverage the USDA's Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework to develop and implement an ERM process to enhance its ability to identify and respond to threats. NASS will also leverage ERM best practices to uncover new opportunities and address challenges. Additionally, a risk dashboard will be developed to incorporate the Configuration Control Boards's (CCB) formal process for approving IT configuration changes that affect NASS systems, ensuring effective oversight and response to IT-related risks.

Challenges and Proposed Solutions

NASS has just begun to establish organizational resources for evidence-based decision-making and challenges to expand capacity for evidence-building and evaluation exist. NASS, along with most federal agencies, face challenges to identify and dedicate resources to conduct evaluation analyses. Collecting data of adequate quality for analysis can be expensive and burdensome on both the respondent and the Agency. NASS is increasing the use of administrative data and will explore using such data, as it works to ensure that the Agency can use it for statistical and evaluation purposes (e.g., creating data documentation and records, updating Policy and Standard Memorandums (PSMs) to include approved uses, or collecting quality data). NASS established a Data Management Governance Board in FY2021. Additionally, NASS is working to implement the Federal Data Strategy, and it will create a Data Evaluation Community of Practice, along with an Enterprise Data Strategy. Taking these combined actions will assist NASS to mitigate risks and challenges.

NASS staff must acquire and develop the capacity to identify and incorporate relevant data and strong evidence, when it is available for decision-making. NASS recognizes the importance of building staff capacity, and it is in the process of establishing mechanisms to support this activity. NASS will identify evaluation skills gaps and plans to continue to assign resources to support evidence and evaluation. NASS has established a Program and Risk Management Branch, which has designated Data Governance and Program Evaluation and Risk Management sections. NASS will support building evidence and evaluation by participating in Performance Evidence and Evaluation Community of Practice to bring together evaluation, analysis, and data stewards and practitioners across the Agency to discuss issues and provide training. NASS will also identify evidence and discuss how it may apply to decision-making through various senior leadership meetings, including the Strategic Planning Council (SPC) meetings and quarterly performance reviews.

NASS has appointed its Chief Data Officer, Evaluation Officer, and Statistical Official in accordance with the Evidence Act and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance. These officials will continue to promote the use of data and evidence, and they sit on the newly established NASS Data Governance Board. This board will inventory NASS data and identify priority datasets for publication.

NASS is one of the thirteen principal statistical agencies¹ in the federal statistical system. Our Nation relies on the flow of objective, credible statistics to support the decisions of governments, businesses,

¹ Federal agencies or organizational units of the Executive Branch whose missions are the collection, compilation, processing, or analysis of information for statistical purposes.

households, and other organizations. Any loss of trust in the integrity of the Federal Statistical System and its products can foster uncertainty about the validity of measures our Nation uses to monitor and assess performance and progress. Federal statistical agencies (or units) whose principal function is the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information for statistical purposes have set for themselves a high standard of scientific integrity. These agencies embrace a common set of professional standards and operational practices designed to ensure the quality, integrity, and credibility of their statistical activities. Implementation of these professional standards involves a wide range of managerial and technical challenges.

To address these challenges, NASS follows the National Research Council of the National Academies (NRC) practical published guidance, [*Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*](#)². NASS and the other principal statistical agencies use this volume to guide their strategic planning, daily operations, and interactions with stakeholders.

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² National Academy of Sciences, *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*, now in its 7th edition, is the flagship publication of the Committee on National Statistics.