Direct-to-Consumer Sales of Agrifood Products by US Farms

Data from the 2022 Census of Agriculture

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Direct-to-Consumer Sales of Agrifood Products by US Farms: Data from the 2022 Census of Agriculture

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Introduction

In 2022, an estimated 116,617 agricultural operations sold agrifood products directly to consumers. This is a decrease of 10.3% compared to data from the previous Census of Agriculture in 2017, where the estimated number was 130,056 farms engaged in direct-to-consumer (DTC) marketing channels. However, the proportion of all U.S. agricultural operations selling via DTC channels has remained relatively stable, accounting for 6.4% of U.S. farms in 2017 and 6.1% in 2022. The gross value of all agrifood products sold directly to consumers by U.S. farms reached $3.26 billion in 2022, accounting for 0.6% of the value of U.S. farm sales. Adjusting for inflation, this is a 3% decrease in total gross sales made directly to consumers by U.S. farms. On average, U.S. farms engaged in DTC marketing channels in 2022 sold a gross value of $27,981 directly to consumers. This is an 8% increase over 2017, when data are adjusted for inflation.

This data brief provides an overview of newly available census data covering direct-to-consumer sales. In a previous data brief (NERCRD Data Brief 2024-1) we analyzed similar data covering producers who receive income from agritourism or recreational services. Notably, USDA’s definition within the 2022 Census of Agriculture and prior does not capture all agritourism activities on a working farm; namely, sales of farm products made directly to consumers – such as those from a pick-your-own activity, wine purchased by a visitor following a complimentary vineyard tour, or products procured from an on-farm store and bakery stand – are explicitly not incorporated into USDA data as part of agritourism. These transactions are categorized under direct sales and, for Census of Agriculture data, are collected in aggregate with sales via other direct-to-consumer channels that are off-farm, such as farmers markets. Additionally, the Census of Agriculture data on direct-to-consumer sales explicitly exclude sales of non-edible products. Yet, these product sales are also a source of revenue often linked inextricably to agritourism activities (e.g. cut-your-own flower farms and Christmas tree woodlots). While available USDA measures are imperfect for understanding agritourism in the U.S., they can provide an approximation. Interest also lies in direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood in its own right as a critical component of local and regional food systems development.

Readers may also have interest in the previously published national and state-level agritourism and direct-to-consumer sales factsheets for more information about these activities based on 2017 Census of Agriculture data.

Key Definitions

Agrifood Product. Any crops, livestock, poultry, or other agriculture products used as food for humans to eat or drink produced on a farm, ranch, or other agricultural operation and sold for consumption.

Direct-to-Consumer Sales. The gross value of any agrifood products sold directly to consumers by the farm which produced them. Includes the value of processed or value-added products made and sold by the operation. Examples: on-farm stores/stands, online markets, CSAs, and off-farm locations such as farmers’ markets and roadside stands or stores. Excludes non-edible products, such as cut flowers, Christmas trees, and nursery products.

Agritourism and Recreational Services. Income earned from guests welcomed onto the farm for experiences, tours, special events, or activities. For USDA data, this excludes the value of products sold directly to consumers on the farm (both agrifood and non-edible products).
Direct-to-Consumer Sales of Agrifood by Farm Size

One means of classifying agricultural operations is by the total land they have in production. Often termed "farm size," this is measured as the total number of acres held and used by operations. USDA has established categories for this measure broken into ranges of total farm acreage. Those categories are reported along the horizontal axis of Figures 1 and 2.

Data show that 67.37% of farms with DTC receipts in 2022 were operating on fewer than 50 acres of land; this includes 43,881 operations with between 10 and 49.9 acres and 34,679 operations farming between 1 and 9.9 acres. This structure echoes that seen in data on agritourism and recreational services. From 2017 to 2022 there was a decline in the number of operations reporting DTC receipts from agritourism in all farm size categories except for the very largest (those with 2,000 acres or more), which saw a marginal net increase of 59 farms. Operations with between 10 and 49.9 acres in production also account for the largest single share of gross sales value from DTC channels at $756.17 million, or 23.17% of all DTC gross sales value in the U.S. In 2017, farms of this size represented 19.29% of DTC sales value in the U.S. Farms operating on 100 to 139 acres saw a similar increase in their proportional share of DTC sales gross value, increasing from 8.62% in 2017 to 12.52% in 2022. These categories highlight a wider observation that from 2017 to 2022 more of the value from DTC sales was captured by farms operating on fewer than 140 acres and less by those operating larger acreages. In total, farms with fewer than 140 acres had estimated receipts from directly selling to consumers totalling $1.95 billion.

The contribution of direct-to-consumer sales activity to farm earnings is of critical importance in gauging the role of these marketing channels in supporting farm livelihoods. Figure 2 reports the average value of DTC gross sales value per operation for each of the farm size categories. Most groupings saw an increase from 2017 to 2022 in the average receipts per farm – the exceptions being among farms with 500 to 999 acres (1% decline in gross sales value) and those with 1,000 to 1,999 acres (43% decline in gross sales value). Thus, data indicate that for some of the largest U.S. farms, average receipts attributed to DTC channels went down. This may be due to declines in overall sales among these groups of farms, but is more likely due to these large farms switching distribution strategies from DTC channels to either conventional channels or to intermediated local and regional food marketing practices such as sales to food hubs, restaurants, and institutions.

The largest increase in per-farm average receipts from DTC sales was among operations with 100 to 139 acres; the average gross value for this group increased 121% (not adjusted for inflation), from $31,844 in 2017 to $70,277 in 2022. For very small farms – which make up the majority of operations engaged in DTC channels – the per-farm averages are lower, at $17,232 for farms with 10 to 49.9 acres and $6,746 for those with fewer than 10 acres, in 2022. As a basis of comparison, the overall per-farm average for the U.S. in 2022 – regardless of farm size – was $27,981 in gross sales value of agrifood products sold directly to consumers.
Direct-to-Consumer Sales by Farm Size (Acreage)
Comparison of Operations and Gross Receipts, 2017 and 2022

Figure 1. Direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood products in the U.S. by farm size: Comparison of number of operations and gross receipts (nominal) from DTC sales, 2017 to 2022

Direct-to-Consumer Sales by Farm Size (Acreage)
Average Value per Operation of Sales Made Directly to Consumers, 2017 to 2022

Figure 2. Direct-to-consumer sales (nominal) of agrifood products in the U.S. by farm size: Average receipts per farm, 2017 to 2022
Direct-to-Consumer Sales by Farm Economic Class

Agricultural operations are also often classified based on the total revenues to the farm in a given year. USDA measures this in various ways, but one common method with wide use is the farm’s “economic class.” Farms are assigned to an economic class based on the sum of the market value of all agricultural products sold (regardless of marketing channel) and Federal farm program payments received. Notably, this classification scheme does not include income from other farm-related sources, such as agritourism. USDA has established standard categories for this classification based on ranges they measure. These categories are reported along the horizontal axis of Figures 3 and 4.

Data summarized in Figure 3 show that the population of U.S. farms engaged in direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood products is predominantly made up of small-scale enterprises – those farms within the economic classes below $50,000 in gross receipts from sales and government payments. In 2017 these smaller-scale farms account for 83.7% of operations selling directly to consumers, and in 2022 this drops to 81.2% of DTC-selling farms. Between 2017 and 2022, there is a slight shift towards the upper end of the farm economic class scale. This may be driven by inflationary pressures, with farms increasing prices as costs and market competition shifted post-pandemic. The precipitous decline in the number of micro farms (those with less than $1,000 in gross receipts) cannot currently be explained at present. This may be due to a change in data collection or reporting, or represent an economic phenomenon such as farm closures. Further investigation beyond the scope of this brief is needed.

Total value of gross sales across all farms within a class also increases as one moves from lower to higher class categories; this is not surprising since DTC sales value is included within the measure underlying the economic class categories. However, worth noting is that farms in the middle tiers (those with between $25,000 and $1 million in farm gross receipts) saw an increase in the total value of DTC sales between 2017 and 2022, while very large farms (those with more than $1 million in gross receipts) contributed less total DTC sales value to the economy in 2022 compared to 2017.

Similar to observations made previously on data by farm size, it is not surprising to find in Figures 4 and 5 that average per farm receipts from DTC sales increase steadily as one moves from smaller-scale categories to larger-scale categories (i.e. along the horizontal axis) as DTC sales are a component of the underlying economic classification measure. Notable, however, is that the largest farm economic classification – those with more than $1 million in receipts – was the only group of U.S. farms that saw a decline in the average per farm value of agrifood product sales made directly to consumers (Figure 4). The average farm in this category saw a 23% decline in nominal DTC sales value, from $556,532 in 2017 down to $426,876 in 2022 – a $129,655 drop without adjustment for inflation.

Figure 5 shows that the micro farms category (those with less than $1,000 in sales) saw a dramatic increase in per-farm average receipts from DTC sales activities, increasing 165%, from $733 per farm in 2017 to $1,946 per farm in 2022.

Figures 4 and 5 also provide critical help in contextualizing the role of DTC sales on U.S. farms. Consider for example that when not accounting for farm economic class, the average per-farm value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers was $21,570 in 2017 and $27,981 in 2022. This average among all DTC-engaged U.S. farms is greater than the category averages for all economic classes with $50,000 and fewer in total receipts, which account for more than 80% of all farms with DTC sales.
Figure 3. Direct-to-Consumer Sales in the U.S. by economic class of farms: Comparison of number of operations and gross value of sales (nominal) made directly to consumers, 2017 to 2022

Figure 4. Direct-to-Consumer Sales in the U.S. by economic class of farms: Average receipts per farm from direct-to-consumer sales (nominal) of agrifood products, 2017 to 2022
Figure 5. Direct-to-Consumer Sales for farm economic classes of $50,000 and below: Average receipts per farm from direct-to-consumer sales (nominal) of agrifood products, 2017 to 2022 [inset to Figure 4]

Figure 6. Number of operations with direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood by U.S. state in 2022
Distribution of Operations Selling Directly to Consumers in the U.S.

Data aggregated at the national-level help reveal broad trends among U.S. agricultural enterprises selling agrifood directly to consumers. However, spatial distribution is also important for understanding the landscape of American agriculture. The number of agricultural operations engaged in selling agrifood directly to consumers – whether on the farm, at markets within communities, or via virtual platforms or subscription-based models – is one measure of how diffused this activity is across the nation. Figure 6 presents these data, while Figures 7 and 8 offer additional context, reporting the growth (or decline) in number of DTC-selling operations since 2017 and the overall proportion of farms engaged in DTC channels in 2022, respectively.

As with data in a prior data brief on agritourism, Texas has the largest total number of farms reporting sales via DTC channels in 2022, with 7,883 estimated operations. Data also reveal two regional bands of states with large total numbers of DTC-engaged farms. The first runs from New York (5,279 farms), westward along the Great Lakes through Pennsylvania (5,526 farms), Ohio (5,748 farms), Michigan (5,295 farms), and Wisconsin (4,848 farms). The second travels along the Pacific coast states of California (5,131 farms), Oregon (4,550 farms), and Washington (3,564 farms). These nine states account for 41% of the agricultural operations selling directly to consumers in the U.S. as of the 2022 Census of Agriculture. However, Figure 7 indicates that the 2022 figure was a decline from 2017 estimates of DTC-selling farms in eight of these nine (the exception: Texas, which saw a 3% increase).

Figure 7. Proportional change in the number of operations with direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood between 2017 and 2022 by U.S. state
Figure 8. Proportion of all farms with direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood by U.S. state in 2022

Only 10 U.S. states saw an increase in the number of their agricultural operations reporting sales of agrifood made directly to consumers. A cluster of these is found around the aforementioned Texas, and includes Louisiana and Oklahoma (both with an 8% increase) and Kansas (9% increase). The others include Illinois (2%), New Jersey and Massachusetts (both at 3%), North Dakota (6%), Rhode Island (11%), and South Carolina (the largest increase, at 12%). California saw the greatest decline in the number of operations with DTC sales of agrifood between 2017 and 2022, with a 33% decline – or 2,492 fewer total farms selling via these channels. Current analysis is descriptive and does not identify factors that may drive these declines. However, we do know that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent inflationary period caused disruption to food systems.

While total number of operations and change over time help reveal total magnitude of farms engaged in DTC, Figure 8 presents an alternative vantage point considering the proportion of all operations within a state that report being engaged in DTC sales. This measures the relative importance of these marketing channels to the state. The six states that comprise New England, along with the non-contiguous states of Hawai‘i and Alaska, have the largest proportion of their farms engaged in DTC sales in 2022. Among New England states, approximately one-quarter of agricultural operations reported sales made directly to consumers. Conversely, a stark band runs along the plains states from North Dakota through Texas, where the percentage of farms selling directly to consumers is below 4%.
Value of Direct-to-Consumer Sales by State

Data on the dollar-denominated value of agrifood sold directly to consumers reveal the economic importance of this marketing channel and the remaining figures in this brief explore the geographic aspects of this across states. Figure 9 examines this geography via data on the proportion of all agricultural sales by farms in a state that were derived from selling agrifood products directly to consumers. As seen in the figure, for the vast majority of states, this is less than 1% - sales made via conventional channels or via intermediated local and regional channels (such as directly to institutions, retailers, restaurants, and food hubs) – simply overwhelm DTC sales in much of the nation.

However, many of the regions and states mentioned in the previous section on number of operations show notable proportions of their agricultural sales value being exchanged directly between farmers and consumers. Massachusetts (13.9%), Rhodes Island (12.7%), and New Hampshire (12.1%) rise to the top of the list all with greater than 10% of sales derived from DTC channels. They are followed by Connecticut (7.1%), Hawai’i (6.4%), New Jersey (5.9%), Vermont (4.2%), and Maine (4.0%). On the Pacific coast, agricultural behemoths like California (1.5%) and Oregon (1.7%) have more than double the national figure of 0.6 percent.

*Figure 9. Direct-to-consumer sales of agrifood as a proportion of the total value of all sales by farms, by U.S. state in 2022*
Notably, 1.5% of California’s total agricultural sales derived from DTC marketing channels accounts for the largest single value of agrifood products sold directly to consumers among the states, at $897.5 million (Figure 10). This represents 28% of the nation’s $3.26 billion in direct-to-consumer agrifood sales. California’s total is also more than three times that of the second-highest state, New York, which 2022 Census of Agriculture data show had $288.1 million in the value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers. Pennsylvania had the third highest total value of DTC sales ($162.6 million), and other notable states include Virginia ($136.6 million), Michigan ($132.8 million), Oregon ($116.5 million), and Texas ($113.1 million). Eight states – those with the lowest total value of DTC sales – had less than $10 million in total value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers. These include Alaska ($3.3 million), North Dakota ($3.7 million), Nevada ($3.9 million), Wyoming ($4.7 million), Mississippi ($4.8 million), South Dakota ($5.8 million), West Virginia ($6.8 million), and Arkansas ($8.5 million).

Also revealing are data on the growth of total agrifood sales to consumers by farms (Figure 11). When considering this growth in monetary values, we adjust historical data to account for inflation. Data underlying Figure 11 were placed in 2022 dollar equivalents using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Consumer Price Index inflation tool. The reference period utilized for Census of Agriculture observations was December 2017 to December 2022. In the Appendix, proportional changes without inflation adjustments (i.e. using nominal data) are reported via Figure A-1. The differences in magnitude between nominal and inflation-adjusted data are notable.

![Figure 10. Total value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers by U.S. state in 2022](image_url)
Figure 11 indicates that Texas saw the largest proportional increase in the value of agrifood products directly sold to consumers; the Lone Star state had a 106% increase in value of DTC sales when adjusting for inflation, which represents an additional value of approximately $58.3 million in sales revenue. In total, 19 states (including Texas) saw proportional increases in DTC sales value between 2017 and 2022 when accounting for inflation. Notably, many of these were states without much prior mention in this brief, such as Kansas (69% increase), Nebraska (52% increase), South Dakota (44% increase), and Montana (33% increase).

However, the majority of states (31 states, or 62%) saw declines in total value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers by their farmers. Some of these proportional losses were substantial, such as Nevada which saw the largest decline at 76%, representing a 2022 dollar equivalent loss of revenue from DTC channels of $12.5 million. West Virginia (50% decline), Mississippi (43% decline), Alaska and Idaho (each with a 38% decline), and Arizona (37% decline) also saw less revenues being generated on farms via direct-to-consumer sales. Even direct-to-consumer sale stalwarts experienced notable reductions, like Massachusetts (30% decline), Vermont (29% decline), Maine and New Hampshire (both with a 23% decline), and Pennsylvania (22% decline).

Figure 11. Proportional change in total value of agrifood sold directly to consumers, 2017 to 2022 (inflation adjusted)
Average Sales per Farm Made Directly to Consumers

Figures 12 and 13 provide an endcap to this brief’s examination of direct-to-consumer sales within the farm economy by presenting data on the average value of DTC sales per farm in 2022 and the inflation-adjusted proportional change in this per-operation average between the two most recent Censuses of Agriculture. Similar to the prior data on aggregate total values, historical (i.e. 2017) data were placed in 2022 dollar equivalents using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI inflation factor for the same reference period. Proportional changes without inflation adjustment (i.e. using nominal data) are reported in the Appendix via Figure A-2. Averages per operation are calculated only over those operations reporting DTC sales, not all farms.

California has the greatest per-operation average value of agrifood sold directly to consumers in 2022 at $174,918. This is more than seven times the national per-farm average of $24,192. Behind the Golden State are Delaware ($70,776), New York ($54,584), New Jersey ($47,735), and Massachusetts ($45,283). In fact, Figure 12 shows a regional cluster along the northern Atlantic coast – composed of states in the megalopolis corridor from New England through the Mid-Atlantic – where per-farm value of DTC sales is relatively high compared to national averages. The exception is West Virginia, which has the lowest per-operation average value of food sold directly to consumers in the nation, at $4,509.
When considering the inflation-adjusted proportional change in average DTC sales per farm between the two Censuses (Figure 13), geographic patterns similar to those for data on changes in total value emerge (Figure 11). Exactly half of all states saw increases in per-operation average sales receipts from DTC channels, with the other half experiencing declines.

Texas experienced a 101% increase in the per-farm average, doubling from $7,157 in 2017 (adjusted for inflation) to $14,352 in 2022. Six states saw at least a 50% proportional increase, including Montana (65%), Nebraska (63%), Kansas (54%), and Washington state and Hawai‘i (both at 51%). While California saw a 42% proportional increase, it had the largest absolute change in inflation-adjusted DTC sales, rising $51,409 between 2017 and 2022. The next highest increase in dollar value was Hawai‘i with a $10,597 difference over the five-year period.

Again, Nevada had the greatest reported decline, with the Silver State’s per-farm average value of agrifood sales direct-to-consumers dropping 70% – a monumental $45,230 decrease from 2017 to 2022. West Virginia (43%) and Mississippi (38%) had the second and third largest declines, although the total dollar value of these was more moderate ($3,422 and $2,922 respectively) given their relative low baseline points. Six additional states saw declines greater than a quarter of their inflation-adjusted 2017 values, which included Massachusetts (32%; $21,395), Arizona (31%; $11,839), South Carolina (28%; $6,588), Idaho (27%; $5,101), Alaska (27%; $5,493), and Delaware (26%; $24,786).

![Proportional Change in Average Value per Operation of Sales Made Directly to Consumers between 2017 & 2022 (inflation adjusted)](image-url)

*Figure 13. Proportional change in average value per operation of agrifood sold directly to consumers, 2017 to 2022 (inflation adjusted)*
Conclusion

Direct-to-consumer sales are an important revenue source for farmers that welcome visitors to their farm, though the overall proportion of farms engaging in DTC channels has slightly decreased from 6.4% in 2017 to 6.1% in 2022. In 2022, an estimated 116,617 agricultural operations sold agrifood products directly to consumers, down 10.3% from 130,056 in 2017. Comparatively, 1.5% of farms generated income from agritourism and recreational services (NERCRD Data Brief 2024-1). These DTC sales are predominantly driven by small-scale farms, with 81.2% of DTC-selling farms in 2022 earning below $50,000 in gross receipts, and 67.37% operating on less than 50 acres.

Regional disparities in the engagement with DTC channels are notable. When it comes to the relative importance of these marketing channels, the six states that comprise New England, along with the non-contiguous states of Hawai‘i and Alaska, have the largest proportion of their farms engaged in DTC sales in 2022. Among New England states, approximately one-quarter of agricultural operations reported sales made directly to consumers. On the other coast, California’s total agricultural sales derived from DTC marketing channels at $897.5 million, represents 28% of the nation’s $3.26 billion in direct-to-consumer agrifood sales. California’s total is also more than three times that of the second-highest state, New York, which 2022 Census of Agriculture data show had $288.1 million in the value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers. Pennsylvania had the third highest total value of DTC sales ($162.6 million).

Texas has the largest total number of farms reporting sales via DTC channels in 2022, with 7,883 estimated operations. Only 10 U.S. states saw an increase in the number of their agricultural operations reporting sales of agrifood made directly to consumers. A cluster of these is found around the aforementioned Texas and includes Louisiana and Oklahoma (both with an 8% increase) and Kansas (9% increase). Texas also saw the largest proportional increase in the value of agrifood products directly sold to consumers; the Lone Star state had a 106% increase in value of DTC sales (adjusted for inflation), which represents an additional value of approximately $58.3 million in sales revenue. However, the majority of states (31 states, or 62%) saw declines in total value of agrifood sales made directly to consumers by their farmers. Some of these proportional losses were substantial, such as Nevada which saw the largest decline at 76%, representing a 2022 dollar equivalent loss of revenue from DTC channels of $12.5 million.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that direct-to-consumer sales remain important for U.S. farmers, especially smaller ones. Even though there has been a slight drop in the number of farms, some regions and states have shown strong participation and revenue from DTC channels. The data highlights the need for targeted strategies to support and improve these sales avenues, ensuring they continue to meet U.S. consumer demand.
Further Reading and Resources

Agritourism in the United States - State & National Factsheets:
https://aese.psu.edu/outreach/agritourism/projects/nifa-agritourism/state-factsheets


Citations and Sources

All figures within this publication were created by the authors. Some figures include calculations made by the authors. Images are copyrighted to the authors; they may be reproduced with permission.

Data underlying this publication are from published data under the USDA Census of Agriculture, made available to the public via the NASS QuickStats 2.0 Database: https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/.
Appendix

Proportional Change in Total Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers by Farms between 2017 & 2022 (nominal)

Figure A-1. Proportional change in total value of agrifood sold directly to consumers, 2017 to 2022 (nominal)
Figure A-2. Proportional change in average value per operation of agrifood sold directly to consumers, 2017 to 2022 (nominal)