

Only 2,185 dairies hang up milkers for last time

Dairy farm numbers dropped only 3.8 percent from the previous year. That's the fourth-smallest-ever percentage drop since count began.

by Hoard's Dairyman staff

DESPITE low milk prices and rising costs, the vast majority of dairy producers continued to milk cows last year. What remains to be seen is how the recent depressed economic conditions, both on the income and expense side of the ledger, will affect long-term dairy farm numbers.

For the moment, last year's 2,185 drop in dairy operations with permits to sell milk represents the second smallest drop in actual numbers. It was last year's drop of 2,003 dairy farms that set the low mark for losses since milk permit tracking began in 1992.

Table 1 shows the 18-year history detailing the number of dairy farms holding permits to sell milk. Since

Table 1. Licensed U.S. dairy farms

Year	Number	% change
1992	131,509	
1993	124,945	-5.0
1994	117,732	-5.8
1995	111,825	-5.0
1996	106,181	-5.3
1997	99,413	-6.4
1998	91,508	-8.0
1999	87,527	-4.4
2000	82,937	-5.2
2001	76,875	-7.3
2002	74,012	-3.7
2003	70,375	-4.9
2004	66,830	-5.0
2005	64,540	-3.4
2006	62,070	-3.8
2007	59,130	-4.7
2008	57,127	-3.4
2009	54,942	-3.8

1992, the drop in licensed or so-called commercial dairy farms has been 76,567, from 131,509 to 54,942. That's a drop of 58 percent during that time.

The farms counted in this survey are those that have a permit to sell milk. This number differs from another USDA estimate . . . operations with milk cows. That total now is 65,000 and has declined 103,500 or 61.9 percent since 1992.

Table 2 provides an overview of the past 17 years of change. Nationally, average herd size has gone up 225 percent, from 74 to today's 167. Com-

pared to last year's 163 cows, the four additional cow in each herd represents the smallest growth this decade. The range for the decade has been between four to eight cows.

Regionally, the West (+222) and the Midwest (+105) have seen the largest percentage gains in average herd size. Western region herds added 26 cows last year, bringing their average to 846 cows per operation. In what was an unusual trend, the Southeast's herd size actually fell by two cows per herd.

For only the second time since the survey began, the West led all regions for the largest share of farm losses at 5 percent. With the West's higher-than-usual losses, it was the first time since 2002 that the Southeast didn't lead the nation in dairy

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farm losses. Since 1992, however, the Southeast's operations fell from 12,057 to 3,845 . . . a drop of 8,212 or 68 percent.

Among states with over 1,000 dairy operations, dairy farm numbers only fell 3.3 percent compared to 7.4 percent for the remaining 38 states. Among the 12 states with over 1,000 permits, the largest percentage declines occurred in Iowa (-6.4); Kentucky (-4.7); California (-4.5); and Vermont (-4.5). Wisconsin with 13,170 dairy farms actually lost the most farms — 560 or 4.1 percent. Among 1,000-plus operation states, Indiana had a small gain in farms at 0.6 percent.


There were eight states in the under 1,000 dairy herds category that lost over 10 percent of their operations: Wyoming (-20); North Dakota (-15.7); South Dakota (-13.3); Oklahoma (-12.9); Mississippi (-12.5); Illinois (-11.5); Nebraska (-10.9) and Louisiana (-10). South Carolina added 15 herds. There were eleven states in which dairy farm numbers did not change. 

Table 2. How our industry changed from 1992 to 2009

	1992			2009			Percent change		
	Herds	Cows (1,000s)	Cows/ herd	Herds	Cows (1,000s)	Cows/ herd	Herds	Cows	Cows/ herd
Midwest	80,135	4,100	51	30,990	3,246	105	-61	-21	105
Northeast	29,785	1,824	61	15,520	1,462	94	-48	-20	54
Southeast	12,057	1,253	104	3,845	612	159	-68	-51	53
West	9,558	2,515	263	4,587	3,882	846	-52	54	222
U.S.	131,535	9,692	74	54,942	9,203	167	-58	-5	127

Table 3. Dairy farm numbers by state and region

State/Region	2008	2009	Change	Percent change
Midwest				
Illinois	960	850	-110	-11.5
Indiana	1,670	1,680	10	0.6
Iowa	2,020	1,890	-130	-6.4
Kansas	425	415	-10	-2.4
Michigan	2,390	2,310	-80	-3.3
Minnesota	4,865	4,700	-165	-3.4
Missouri	1,760	1,740	-20	-1.1
Nebraska	320	285	-35	-10.9
North Dakota	255	215	-40	-15.7
Ohio	3,360	3,310	-50	-1.5
South Dakota	490	425	-65	-13.3
Wisconsin	13,730	13,170	-560	-4.1
Region total	32,245	30,990	-1,255	-3.9
Northeast				
Connecticut	150	150	0	0.0
Delaware	55	50	-5	-9.1
Maine	330	320	-10	-3.0
Maryland	570	540	-30	-5.3
Massachusetts	180	180	0	0.0
New Hampshire	130	130	0	0.0
New Jersey	110	100	-10	-9.1
New York	5,620	5,470	-150	-2.7
Pennsylvania	7,670	7,400	-270	-3.5
Rhode Island	20	20	0	0.0
Vermont	1,100	1,050	-50	-4.5
West Virginia	110	110	0	0.0
Region total	16,045	15,520	-525	-3.3
Southeast				
Alabama	65	65	0	0.0
Arkansas	150	140	-10	-6.7
Florida	140	140	0	0.0
Georgia	270	270	0	0.0
Kentucky	1,060	1,010	-50	-4.7
Louisiana	200	180	-20	-10.0
Mississippi	160	140	-20	-12.5
North Carolina	300	290	-10	-3.3
Oklahoma	310	270	-40	-12.9
South Carolina	80	95	15	18.8
Tennessee	550	530	-20	-3.6
Virginia	725	715	-10	-1.4
Region total	4,010	3,845	-165	-4.1
West				
Alaska	5	5	0	0.0
Arizona	120	110	-10	-8.3
California	1,905	1,820	-85	-4.5
Colorado	140	130	-10	-7.1
Hawaii	2	2	0	0.0
Idaho	635	600	-35	-5.5
Montana	80	75	-5	-6.3
Nevada	25	25	0	0.0
New Mexico	160	150	-10	-6.3
Oregon	300	290	-10	-3.3
Texas	670	650	-20	-3.0
Utah	260	240	-20	-7.7
Washington	500	470	-30	-6.0
Wyoming	25	20	-5	-20.0
Region total	4,827	4,587	-240	-5.0
U.S. Total	57,127	54,942	-2,185	-3.8