The recently released federal census of Louisiana agriculture shows total farm numbers continuing downward, with big farms becoming bigger and small farmers getting out.

Only 20 percent of Louisiana’s 25,000 farmers bring home more than $10,000 a year.

After remaining static for 25 years, the average age of Louisiana’s farmers is getting older. Statistically, the age of the Louisiana farmer rose three years — from 50.5 years to 53.5 years — between 1982 and 1992. In 1959, the average age of the Louisiana farmer was 50.9 years.

"It’s not pretty, but that’s the reality of the 1990s," according to Bob Odom, state commissioner of agriculture. "A man with a college education who expects to make a decent living can make a lot better money with a lot less anxiety moving to the city and a desk job.

According to the census, in Louisiana, an average farmer’s net income — his take-home income — is about 20 percent of his gross income. To take home $10,000 a year, a farmer must sell $50,000 worth of commodities. Of Louisiana’s 25,652 farmers, only 5,831 are grossing more than $50,000. This means that only slightly more than 20 percent of Louisiana’s farmers take home more than $10,000 a year from farming.

Those taking home $10,000 or less each year fell between 1987 and 1992, from 21,578 to 19,821.

"These figures indicate farmers are getting out of the business and those that remain are farming part time," Odom said. "And, as the squeeze on profit margins continues, the only way to make up for it is to produce more crops on more land at less cost."

In 1959 there were 74,438 farms in Louisiana. By 1987 there were 27,350 farms and in 1992 there were 25,652 farms, a decline of nine percent over the five-year period, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s 1992 Census of Agriculture for Louisiana.

In 1959 there were 41,650 Louisiana farms between one and 50 acres. In 1987 there were 9,865 such farms. In 1992 the number as 8,829, a decline of nine percent in the five-year period.

The number of farms between 50 acres and 1,000 acres also fell between 1987 and 1992, from 15,661 to 14,915, or 4.9 percent.

The only category of farms to show an increase was those of 1,000 acres or greater. Their numbers increased from 1,824 to 1,908, a 4.25 percent increase.

"Of course, the truth is that many farmers have a second job. And his wife better be teaching and be covered by the school board's health insurance, or something similar. If not, that family is operating in the poverty zone."

There were 2,401 Louisiana farmers grossing $100,000 to $250,000, taking home $20,000 to $50,000 a year. This was an increase of five farmers, up from 2,396 in 1987.

At the high end of the scale, farmers grossing between $250,000 and $500,000 per year jumped from 927 to 1,144 in the five-year period.

At the 20 percent net income figure, these farmers can expect to take home at least $50,000 to $100,000 a year, and probably more because of the advantages of scale.

And, at the top end, those grossing more than $500,000 annually increased by 62 percent, rising from 386 farmers to 616 farmers.