



Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2012

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What Is the Issue?

ERS's Major Land Uses (MLU) series is the only inventory of all major uses of public and private land in all 50 States. Since 1945, these estimates have been published at roughly 5-year intervals, coinciding with the Census of Agriculture. Land uses and land-use changes have important economic and environmental implications for commodity production and trade, provision of ecosystem services, soil and water conservation, and other policy issues. Although land-use decisions are typically made by landowners at the level of individual land plots (or parcels), a consistent series of aggregate statistics over time is useful for benchmarking broader shifts and trends. This study presents the results of the latest inventory (2012) of U.S. major land uses and examines national and regional trends in land use over time.

What Did the Study Find?

The U.S. land area totals just under 2.3 billion acres. Major land uses in 2012 included grassland pasture and rangeland at 655 million acres (29 percent of the U.S. total), forest-use land at 632 million acres (28 percent), cropland at 392 million acres (17 percent), special uses (primarily parks and wildlife areas) at 316 million acres (14 percent), miscellaneous uses (such as wetlands, tundra, and unproductive woodlands) at 196 million acres (9 percent), and urban land at 70 million acres (3 percent).

Cropland. Total cropland includes land planted for crops (87 percent of total cropland), cropland used for pasture, and idled cropland (including acreage removed from production under Government programs, such as USDA's Conservation Reserve Program). Between 2007 and 2012, total cropland decreased by 16 million acres to its lowest level since this series began in 1945. However, harvested cropland (which accounts for most land planted to crops) increased by 3 million acres due to favorable market conditions for several major commodities (including corn). A 23-million-acre decrease in cropland pasture contributed to the overall decline in cropland. The drop partly stemmed from changes in the methodology used in the Census of Agriculture in 2007 and 2012. As a result, it is likely that some land formerly identified as cropland pasture is categorized as permanent grassland pasture and range in this study.

Grassland pasture and range. Grassland pasture and range increased by 41 million acres (almost 7 percent) between 2007 and 2012, resulting in the highest estimate for this land-use class since 1945. The recent increase more than offsets the 23-million-acre decline in cropland pasture over the same period. Based on acreage for *all* grazing land (the sum of grassland pasture and range, cropland used for pasture, and grazed forests), land available for grazing

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

increased from 777 million acres in 2007 to 798 million acres in 2012, reversing a downward trend observed from 1945 through 2007.

Forest-use land. Forest-use land in 2012 included 130 million acres of grazed forests but excluded an estimated 135 million forest acres in parks, wildlife areas, and other special uses where commercial timber harvests are rare. Forest-use land decreased 40 million acres (6 percent) from 2007 to 2012, reversing an uptick from 1997 to 2007.

Urban and rural residential areas. Urban land area increased by a factor of 4.7 from 1945 to 2012, growing at more than twice the rate of population growth over this period. Land in urban areas was estimated at 70 million acres in 2012, up 10 million acres since 2002. This category excludes rural acreage used for residential purposes outside of urban areas. Rural residential land increased from 103 million to 106 million acres between 2007 and 2013 (the year closest to 2012 for which rural residential acreage data were available). The 3-million-acre increase reflects a slower rate of growth than in previous periods, which is likely due, in part, to the mortgage crisis that marked the Great Recession. Although farmland loss between 2002 and 2012 was concentrated in metro counties, more rural nonmetro counties also experienced declines, illustrating that farmland conversion can occur outside of urban areas.

Special-use areas. Special-use areas include land for rural transportation, national and State parks, wilderness and wildlife areas, national defense and industrial areas, and farmsteads and farm roads. Across all 50 States, special-use areas more than doubled since 1959, including a fourfold increase in rural parks and fish and wildlife areas. Over 2007-12, special-use areas exhibited a net increase of more than 2 million acres (less than 1 percent). The growth was driven by a nearly 5-million-acre increase in defense/industrial land and a 2-million-acre increase in rural parks and wilderness areas, though these gains were offset by a 4-million-acre reduction in farmstead areas.

Regional patterns. Regional land-use patterns vary based on differences in soil, climate, Federal and local policies and programs, topography, and population. Relatively stable patterns of land use at the national level obscure larger land-use changes at regional and State levels. For example, between 1969 and 2012, cropland used for crops increased by 7 million acres nationally—an increase of nearly 13 million acres in the Corn Belt was offset by a net decline of 6 million acres across all other regions. Over this 43-year period, the distribution of acreage used for crops across major crop-producing regions remained about the same.

Ownership. About 60 percent (1.37 billion acres) of the land in the United States is privately owned. The Federal Government owns approximately 28 percent (644 million acres), over a third of which is in Alaska. State and local governments own just over 8 percent (189 million acres). The remainder, about 3 percent (63 million acres), is held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Total federally owned land declined by 9 million acres between 2007 and 2012. About 2 percent (25 million acres) of U.S. farm and forestland was foreign owned in 2012.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data from USDA's Forest Service and National Agricultural Statistics Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, public land management and conservation agencies, and other sources were compiled by State and used to estimate the uses of several broad classes and subclasses of land in 2012. ERS researchers used standardized procedures to develop the estimates. Estimates of cropland, urban area, and special uses are based largely on census data and administrative data and were developed first. Estimates of forest-use land, grassland pasture and range, and miscellaneous land uses followed. Though all land-use categories require reconciliation among sources at the State level, some categories in the MLU series were adjusted more than others based on the residual amount of land after other uses were tabulated. These categories include miscellaneous land and, to some extent, grassland pasture and range—categories for which less reliable data sources are available relative to those for cropland and forest-use areas.