



Situation

Urban areas are continuing to grow into the countryside, and more isolated large-lot housing development is occurring beyond the urban fringe. Between 1960 and 1990, metropolitan-area population grew by 50 percent while the acreage of developed land increased 100 percent. An estimated one-fifth of the Nation's 250 million acres of prime agricultural land is considered at risk for development because of its proximity to the Nation's 100 largest cities. The National Home Builders Association forecasts that 1.3 to 1.5 million new homes will be built each year through 2010. If current development patterns continue, these will be larger homes, on larger lots, farther from central cities. Land in all agricultural uses is being affected by development pressure.

Forest Land

Private forest land is the major source of newly developed acres. If fragmentation, the dividing of land into smaller ownerships, continues at the current rate of change, 38 percent of forest land will be in parcels of less than 100 acres

by 2010. Such small parcels are less likely to be managed for wood or fiber production or to provide the multiple benefits associated with forest systems. Unmanaged forests can become overstocked, increasing their susceptibility to pests, disease, and fires. Epidemics of bark beetles in the South and West and the increase in frequency and intensity of major wildfires in recent years are associated with overstocked forests.

Cropland

Cropland that is converted to developed uses is dominantly prime farmland—the land that is best suited to growing crops. The conversion of prime farmland results in the loss of productive soil resources as well as reduced production of some high-value or specialty crops. In California's Central Valley, 15,000 acres of farmland are developed each year. The Central Valley currently produces 10 percent of the Nation's farm output on less than one percent of the Nation's farmland.

Grazing Lands

Fragmentation of rangeland is an increasing concern in many areas of the West. Unlike the East, the pattern

of land conversion in the West is divisions of large parcels into relatively small "ranchettes" rather than into concentrated development. Although the land is still in an agriculturally use, these small units are generally not managed as working ranches. The corresponding absence of adequate range management allows invasive species to become well-established and to threaten the health of wide areas of the landscape. Such development may also hinder the ability of wildlife to move freely within their habitat.

Agricultural Viability

Urban sprawl and fragmentation of the landscape also affect the viability of agricultural operations. Conflicts often develop between agricultural operators and new residents that make production more difficult or more expensive. Increasing land prices, taxes, and regulations may cause operators to sell their land for development and leave farming or move to a less developed area to begin again. As the concentration of agriculture operations declines, the viability of remaining operations is further challenged.



Key Tasks

Working in partnership with many different entities, NRCS has helped communities to make wise land management decisions for decades. Our current conservation efforts will be strengthened by strategic emphases to assist communities in developing and implementing land management strategies that meet their objectives and sustain or improve environmental quality.

Current Conservation Management

NRCS provides information and analytical tools to governments, communities,

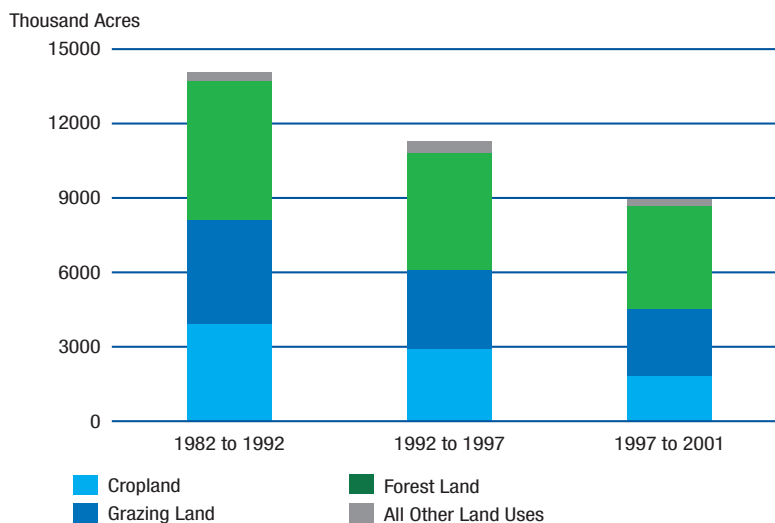
and other entities that are responsible for comprehensive land use planning so they can balance development and other land uses to achieve an appropriate mix that supports environmental quality, economic opportunity, and social desires. The tools we provide include:

- Planning tools, such as landscape suitability modeling and science-based resource data, that enable local communities to plan for development, identify agriculturally and ecologically significant areas, zone for agriculture, and identify land most suited for development; and
- Accurate and up-to-date soils data and other natural resource data that can be used by local planning bodies to ensure natural resources are protected.

We also partner with State and local governments, Tribes, and non-governmental entities to purchase development rights, helping communities preserve priority farm and forest land in long-term and permanent easements. State Technical Committees, local USDA workgroups, and Resource Conservation and Development Councils assist in coordinating local, State, regional, and Tribal efforts to protect farm, ranch, and forest lands from fragmentation.

We help operators keep farms viable through stewardship incentive payments and by providing information about alternative or value-added enterprises, such as niche crops or agri-tourism, that may improve farm economics. We also provide cost-share for tree establishment, forest site preparation, and timber stand improvement to help land-owners sustainably manage their forested acreage.

Figure 8. Sources of Newly Developed Land, Annual Acres by Time Period.



Source: NRCS, National Resources Inventory, 2001



Strategic Emphases

To accelerate progress toward watersheds with well-balanced land uses that meet communities' natural resource, economic, and social objectives, NRCS will:

- Increase our investment in developing resource information and area-wide planning tools that can assist local communities as they comprehensively plan for growth and zone for agricultural protection;
- Encourage development of information resources for local governments, communities, natural resource managers, and operators on estate planning and facilitating land transfer to agricultural buyers. The information will encourage retention of important lands in agriculture and forest uses;
- Encourage development of a national information warehouse to make geographic data available on existing easements, across participating government and non-governmental entities, in order to enable protection of contiguous blocks of agricultural and forest lands;
- Expand technical and educational tools to help alternative agricultural enterprises, such as agri-tourism and niche markets, maintain economic viability; and
- Actively manage conservation easements under the Agency's administrative control in order to maintain agricultural viability and natural resource protection.

Information Enables Cooperative Action

In cooperation with the National Agricultural Library and American Farmland Trust, NRCS provides funding to support the Farmland Information Center (FIC). FIC is a clearinghouse for information about farmland protection and stewardship. It provides an online collection of laws, literature, and technical resources to assist agencies, academics, non-governmental organizations, and concerned citizens in making informed land use decisions and policies.





Contour stripcropping prevents soil erosion.



