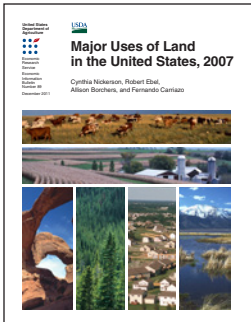


ERS *Report Summary*

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Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2007

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What Is the Issue?

The ERS *Major Land Uses* (MLU) series is the only accounting of all major uses of public and private land in all 50 States. These State estimates were started in 1945 and have been consistently published at roughly 5-year intervals, coinciding with the Census of Agriculture. Land use and land-use changes involve important economic and environmental implications for commodity production and trade, open space, soil and water conservation, and other policy issues. To study land-use change, statistics on land use over time must be developed. This publication presents the results of the latest inventory (2007) of U.S. major land uses and discusses national and regional trends in land use compared with earlier estimates.

What Did the Study Find?

The U.S. land area totals nearly 2.3 billion acres. Major land uses in 2007 included forest-use land at 671 million acres (30 percent); grassland pasture and range at 614 million acres (27 percent); cropland at 408 million acres (18 percent); special uses at 313 million acres (14 percent); miscellaneous uses at 197 million acres (9 percent); and urban land at 61 million (3 percent).

Cropland. Total cropland includes land planted for crops (82 percent of total cropland), cropland used for pasture, and idled cropland (including acreage removed from production under Government programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program). Total cropland increased in the late 1940s, declined from 1949 to 1964, increased from 1964 to 1978, and decreased again from 1978 to 2007. Between 2002 and 2007, total cropland decreased by 34 million acres to its lowest level since this series began in 1945, even though harvested cropland (which accounts for most land planted to crops) increased 5 million acres due to a recovery of failed cropland from severe droughts in 2002. A 26-million-acre decline in cropland pasture contributed to this trend, partly due to methodological changes in the 2007 Census of Agriculture that reclassified some cropland pasture to permanent grassland pasture and range.

Grassland Pasture and Range. The estimated acreage of grassland pasture and range increased by 27 million acres (almost 5 percent) between 2002 and 2007, partly offsetting a decline in this land-use type during 1945-97. The recent increase almost exactly offsets the 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 declined from 783 million acres in 2002 to 777 million acres in 2007, continuing a downward trend since the 1940s.

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Forest-Use Land. Forest-use land in 2007 includes 127 million acres of grazed forests, but excludes an estimated 80 million forest acres in parks, wildlife areas, and other special uses. Forest-use land increased 20 million acres (3 percent) from 2002 to 2007, continuing a trend that became evident in 2002 and reversing an almost 50-year downward trend. The 14-percent decline in forest-use land between 1949 and 2002 was largely due to forest-use land reclassified to special-use areas.

Urban and Rural Residential Areas. Urban land acreage quadrupled from 1945 to 2007, increasing at about twice the rate of population growth over this period. Land in urban areas was estimated at 61 million acres in 2007, up almost 2 percent since 2002 and 17 percent since 1990 (after adjusting the 1990 estimate for the new criteria used in the 2000 Census). The Census Bureau estimates that urban area increased almost 8 million acres (13 percent) during the 1990s. Census estimates based on the previous criteria indicate that urban area increased 9 million acres (18 percent) over the 1980s, 13 million acres (37 percent) over the 1970s, and 9 million acres (36 percent) over the 1960s. Estimated rural residential acreage outside urban areas increased to 103 million acres between 2002 and 2007. In percentage terms, this 9-million-acre (10-percent) increase is about a third of the 21-million-acre (29-percent) increase over the previous 5-year period (1997-2002) and reflects the downturn in the residential housing market that occurred during the mid 2000s. Despite continuing large percentage increases in urban and rural residential areas, declines in the remaining rural area are small given the size of the available land base.

Special-Use Areas. Special-use areas include rural transportation, national/State parks, wilderness and wildlife areas, national defense and industrial areas, and farmsteads and farm roads. Over all 50 States, special-use areas have increased nearly threefold since 1959, including a fourfold increase in rural parks and fish and wildlife areas. Over 2002-07, special-use areas increased more than 16 million acres (6 percent). Some of the estimated rise in special-use areas from 2002 to 2007 was driven by improved data, leading to a reclassification of miscellaneous and other land, which declined by 31 million acres (14 percent) over the same period.

Regional Patterns. Regional land-use patterns vary with differences in soil, climate, 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, while cropland used for crops remained constant nationally between 1964 and 2007, cropland used for crops increased by 12 million acres in the Corn Belt and Northern Plains and decreased by 12 million acres in the remaining regions. Over this 43-year period, the distribution of acreage used for crops across major crop-producing regions remained about the same.

Ownership. Nearly 60 percent (1.35 billion acres) of the land in the United States is privately owned. The Federal Government owns 29 percent (653 million acres), over a third of which is in Alaska. State and local governments own about 9 percent (198 million acres). About 3 percent (66 million acres) is in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There were no major changes in these aggregate ownership statistics from 2002 to 2007. Foreign ownership accounted for about 1 percent (22 million acres) of U.S. land in 2007.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data from USDA's Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, public land management and conservation agencies, and other sources were compiled by State to estimate the uses of several broad classes and subclasses of land in 2007. Standardized procedures were used to develop the estimates. Estimates of cropland, urban area, and special uses, which are based largely on census data and administrative data, are developed first. The estimates of forest-use land and grassland pasture and range are then developed, followed by miscellaneous land uses. Though all land-use categories require reconciliation among sources at the State level, some categories in the MLU series are adjusted more than others based on the residual amount of land after other uses are 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 cropland and forest-use areas. In general, more confidence should be put in the broader land-use trends over decades rather than specific 5-year fluctuations.