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Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2017

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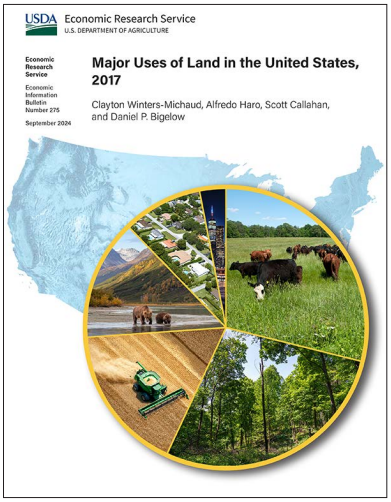
What Is the Issue?

Land uses and land-use changes have important economic and environmental implications. USDA, Economic Research Service's (ERS) Major Land Uses (MLU) series is the only inventory of all major uses of public and private land in all 50 U.S. States. Since 1945, these estimates have been published at near 5-year intervals, coinciding with the USDA's Census of Agriculture. This study presents the results of the latest inventory (2017) of U.S. major land uses and examines national and regional trends of land use over time.



What Did the Study Find?

Figure 1 shows the percent of the total U.S. land area (2.26 billion acres) devoted to each of the major land-use categories for 2017.

Cropland

Total cropland includes land used for crops (87 percent of total cropland), cropland used for pasture, and idled cropland, including acreage removed from production under Government programs such as the USDA, Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program. Between 2012 and 2017, total cropland decreased by 2 million acres (0.5 percent) to its lowest level (390 million acres) since this series began in 1945. Between 2002 and 2012, the USDA's Census of Agriculture (the primary data source for our cropland estimates) used consecutive methodological changes that resulted in land that had formerly been classified as cropland, specifically cropland pasture, becoming reclassified as grassland pasture and range in subsequent censuses. These methodological changes coincided with a 50-million-acre (11 percent) decrease in total cropland between 2002 and 2012, 49 million of which had formerly been cropland pasture. Thus, despite 2017 representing a historic low for cropland acreage, a substantial portion of the decline between 2002 and 2012 should be viewed as the result of changes in how land at the intersection of cropland and pastureland was classified, rather than how the land was used.

Grassland Pasture and Range

Grassland pasture and range use increased by 4 million acres (1 percent) between 2012 and 2017 to 659 million acres, its highest recorded amount since 1945. Over this same period, acreage for all grazing land (the sum of grassland pasture and range, cropland used for pasture, and grazed forests) increased by 7 million acres (just under 1 percent) to 805 million acres, continuing a reversal of the downward trend observed from 1945 through 2007.

Forest-Use Land

Forest-use land includes land that serves commercial forest uses, including grazed and ungrazed forest-use land, as opposed to land that has forest cover but is used for other purposes (e.g., forestland in parks, wildlife areas, or other special uses). Forest-use land in 2017 totaled 622 million acres and included 132 million acres of grazed forests. But the use excluded approximately 140 million forest acres in parks, wildlife areas, and other special uses where commercial timber harvests are rare. Forest-use land decreased by 10 million acres (2 percent) from 2012 to 2017, reversing an uptick from 1997 to 2007, while reserved forestland increased by 7.2 million acres. Total forested land used for all purposes amounted to 765.5 million acres in the United States in 2017, which represents a 0.1-percent (0.7 million acres) decrease from 2012.

Urban Areas

Land in urban areas was estimated to be 74 million acres in 2017, up 4 million acres since 2012. Urban land area increased by a factor of 4.9 from 1945 to 2017, growing at more than twice the rate of population growth over this period.

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. From 2012 to 2017, special-use areas exhibited a net increase of just under 2 million acres (less than 1 percent).

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data were compiled by State and used to estimate the uses of several broad classes and subclasses of land in 2017. The data came from the USDA's Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service; the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; the U.S. Department of Transportation; the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey; and other sources. Estimates were developed using the same standardized procedure as previous versions of this report while also incorporating new or improved data.