How Land Is Used

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Angus cattle graze on range near Choteau, Montana. Grazing is the predominant use of U.S. agricultural land. (Tim McCabe, SCS, MT-10,255)

The Nation's land use has shifted slightly from agricultural to nonagricultural over the past several decades. Nearly one of every two acres—47 percent of all land—was in agricultural uses in 1982, the most recent estimate available. In comparison, about 52 percent was in agricultural uses in 1910 and 49 percent in 1950 including Alaska and Hawaii which became States in 1959.

Agricultural Uses

Over 60 percent of all agricultural land was in pasture and range in 1982. Permanent pasture and range accounted for nearly 600 million acres. Another 65 million acres of cropland were in pasture as part of crop rotations. About 158 million acres of forest land also were grazed and are included in nonagricultural uses.

Cropland was the other principal

Wheat is harvested near Pullman, Washington. It is the leading crop in that State. (Doug Wilson, 0983X1265-18)

use. Cropland used for crops totaled 383 million acres, representing about one-third of all agricultural land. Another 21 million acres of cropland were idle, and 8 million acres used for farmsteads and farm roads.

Nonagricultural Uses

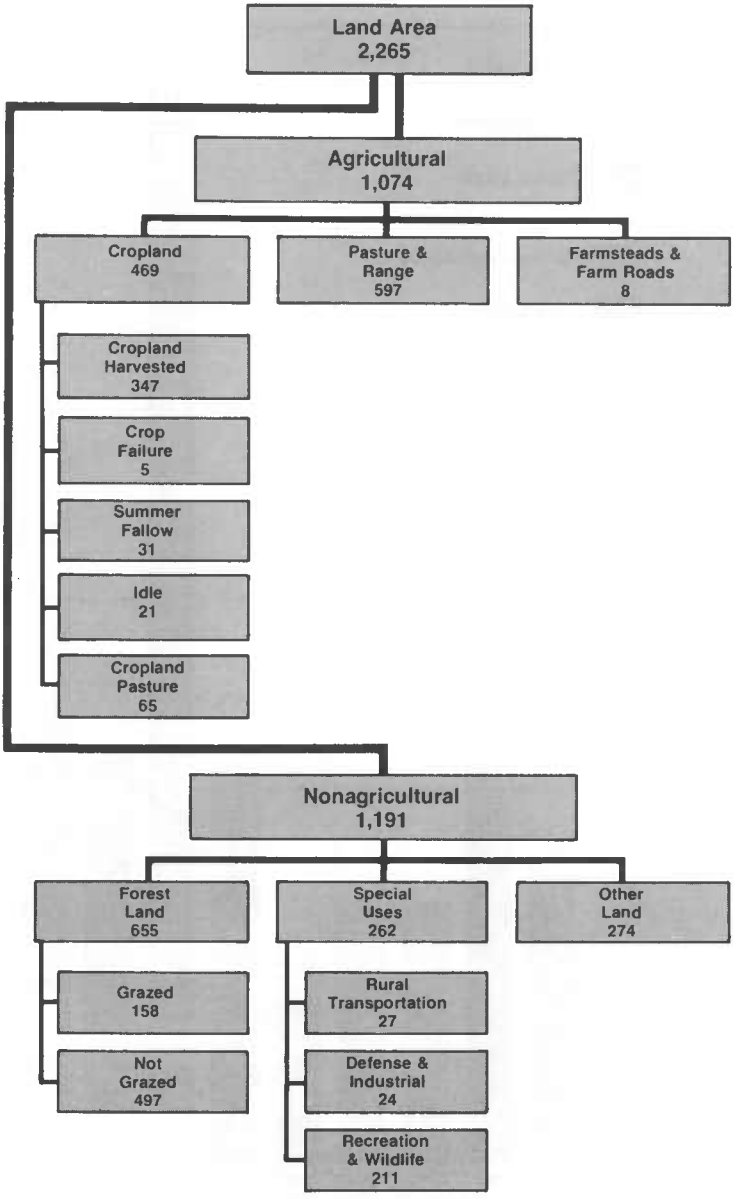
About 655 million of the 1,191 million acres of nonagricultural land was inventoried as forest land in 1982. Another 211 million acres were in recreational uses such as national and State parks, wildlife refuges, and national wilderness areas. Rural transportation systems accounted for 27 million acres, national defense and industrial areas for 24 million acres, and "other land" including urban areas, wetlands, deserts, and tundra for 274 million acres.

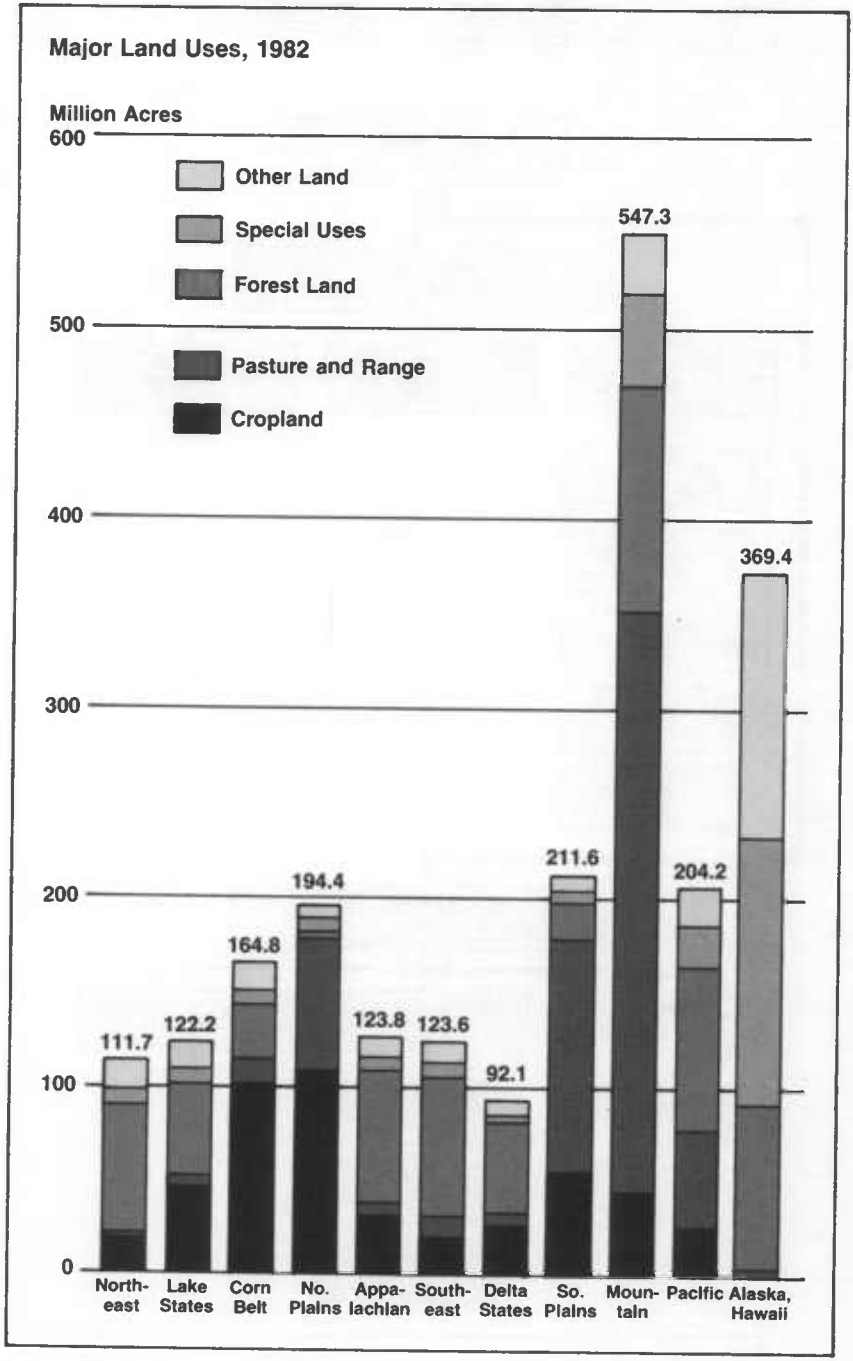
Regional Variations

Resources and climate strongly influence land-use patterns. The Corn Belt and Northern Plains regions have soils and growing conditions favorable to crop production. These two regions contained nearly 45 percent of all cropland in 1982 but only 16 percent of the total land area. In comparison, the Mountain region had one-fourth of all land but less than 10 percent of all cropland.

Pasture and range was the predominant use in the Southern Plains (122 million) and the Mountain region

United States, 1982—Million Acres




Major Land Uses, 1982
Million Acres
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
Other Land
Special Uses
Forest Land
Pasture and Range
Cropland
111.7
122.2
164.8
194.4
123.8
123.6
92.1
211.6
547.3
204.2
369.4
North-east
Lake States
Corn Belt
No. Plains
Appa-lachian
South-east
Delta States
So. Plains
Moun-tain
Pacific
Alaska, Hawaii

(305 million). The two regions accounted for more than 70 percent of all pasture and range and one-third of all land. Large acreages of grazing land also were inventoried in the Northern Plains and Pacific regions.

Acreage in forest land was distributed more uniformly. Largest acreages were located in the Mountain (120 million) and Pacific (85 million) regions and in Alaska (87 million). Forest acreage was not significant in the Northern Plains and relatively minor in the Corn Belt and Southern Plains.

More than half the U.S. acreage in State and national parks, wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, and national defense and industrial areas was located in Alaska and another one-fourth in the Mountain and Pacific regions. These three areas also had nearly 70 percent of "other land uses," principally wetlands, bare rock areas, deserts, and tundra.

U.S. Land-Use Changes Since 1950

Economic conditions have varied widely over the past three decades. At times, Federal farm programs have been implemented to decrease acreage in crop production and, at other times, to increase acreage. Conversions to nonagricultural uses have continued. Federal and State legislation to create or expand park systems, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges has mandated land-use changes.

Cropland acreage decreased 9 million acres from 478 million acres in 1950 to 469 million acres in 1982. As already noted, however, percentages in cropland have remained almost unchanged. No cropland was diverted from production in 1950, but 22 million acres were diverted in 1959 and 58 million in 1969. Acreages in idle cropland, cropland pasture, and, to a lesser extent, cultivated summer fallow increased during these years while cropland harvested acreage declined. As cost-price relationships improved in the late 1970's and export markets expanded, fewer acres were idled and some cropland pasture was converted to crop production. By 1982, harvested acreage increased to 347 million, nearly the same as in 1950. About 11 million acres were diverted from production under Federal farm programs in 1982.

Largest acreage reductions during 1950 to 1982 occurred in pasture and range and in forest land. Some was converted to cropland, but most was reclassified to special uses, particularly park systems, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges, which increased from 107 million acres in 1950 to 262 million acres in 1982.

Regional Changes

Although fewer acres were in cropland at the national level in 1982 than in 1950, acreages were higher in several regions. Largest expansions were realized in the Corn Belt (4.5 million), the Northern Plains (6.3 million), and the Mountain region (4.2 million). Cropland pasture and permanent pasture and range were converted to crop production in all three regions.

The Northeast, Appalachian, and

Southeast regions all had significant reductions in cropland acreage. Conversions of cropland to urban and other nonagricultural uses in the Northeast and Southeast contributed to reductions in cropland acreage being about 30 percent below 1950 levels. Some cropland was also shifted to pasture in the southeast. Cropland acreage declined nearly 20 percent in the Appalachian region, principally through conversions to forest land.

Regional change in agricultural uses varied even more widely than changes in cropland. Nearly 40 million fewer acres were in agricultural uses in the Mountain region by 1982 following reclassification of large acreages in pasture and range to special uses and "other land." Similar changes occurred in the Pacific region where nearly 10 million fewer acres were in agricultural uses. Agricultural acreage also was down in the Northeast (12.4 million) and in the Appalachian region (10.1 million) where cropland and pasture were shifted to or reverted to forest land. Acreage was higher in the Southern Plains (28.9 million) and the Delta States (1.9 million) as forest land was cleared for cropland and pasture.

Changes To Continue

Land-use changes will continue as economic conditions for competing uses of land vary and as governmental programs and policies affecting land-use decisions are altered.

Concerning use of agricultural land, the Conservation Reserve Program within the Food Security Act of 1985 has targeted 45 million acres of highly erodible cropland for conversion to soil-conserving uses by 1990. Landowners contract to keep cropland in conserving uses for 10 years. At least 5 million of the 45 million acres are to be planted to trees. Experiences with the Soil Bank Program of the 1950's and other longer term cropland retirement programs suggest that some of this former cropland will remain in permanent vegetation. The sodbuster provision of the 1985 act and recent changes in the U.S. tax code will tend to discourage conversions of pasture and forest land to cropland.

Conversions to urban and other nonagricultural uses will continue. Legislation to protect and preserve agricultural land will discourage and, in some situations, prohibit such conversions. Legislation to expand park systems, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas is likely.