

STATE OF THE LAND

A brief inventory of public and private land in the United States



“In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Quoted from an essay by Thoreau lamenting the way in which modern urban life has made natural resources into commodities and isolated people from the natural processes on which their lives depended. Move forward to 2006, “open space” or “green space” has nearly replaced ‘wilderness’ in our vocabulary with the rise in the development of the rural landscape. The US population is now over 300 million and

more and more people are sprawling out from the urban areas into the country. This push outward is having a measurable effect on our open spaces. Farmland near cities has seen its value inflated by demand for conversion to non-farm uses. People are often willing to pay more than agricultural value in order to live in primarily rural areas. For example, in Iowa there are now more non-farmers living in rural areas than there are farmers.

LANDOWNERSHIP

There are no ideal data sources on land ownership in the United States—other than in the 3,000-plus county courthouses throughout the Nation. Every 5 years, the census of agriculture reports on “land in farms,” which accounts for roughly half of all private land in the U.S. This Census offers the most comprehensive data on farms and farmers, including the land they operate. Yet it is a poor source of information on agricultural land ownership; it covers landowners only when they are also “farm operators” (farmers). Other landlords and non-operator owners are intentionally excluded from the census of agriculture.¹

The land surface of the United States covers 2.3 billion acres. Private owners held 61 percent in 2002, the Federal Government 28 percent, State and local governments 9 percent, and Indian reservations 3 percent. Virtually all cropland is privately owned, as is three-fifths of grassland pasture and range, and over half of forestland.

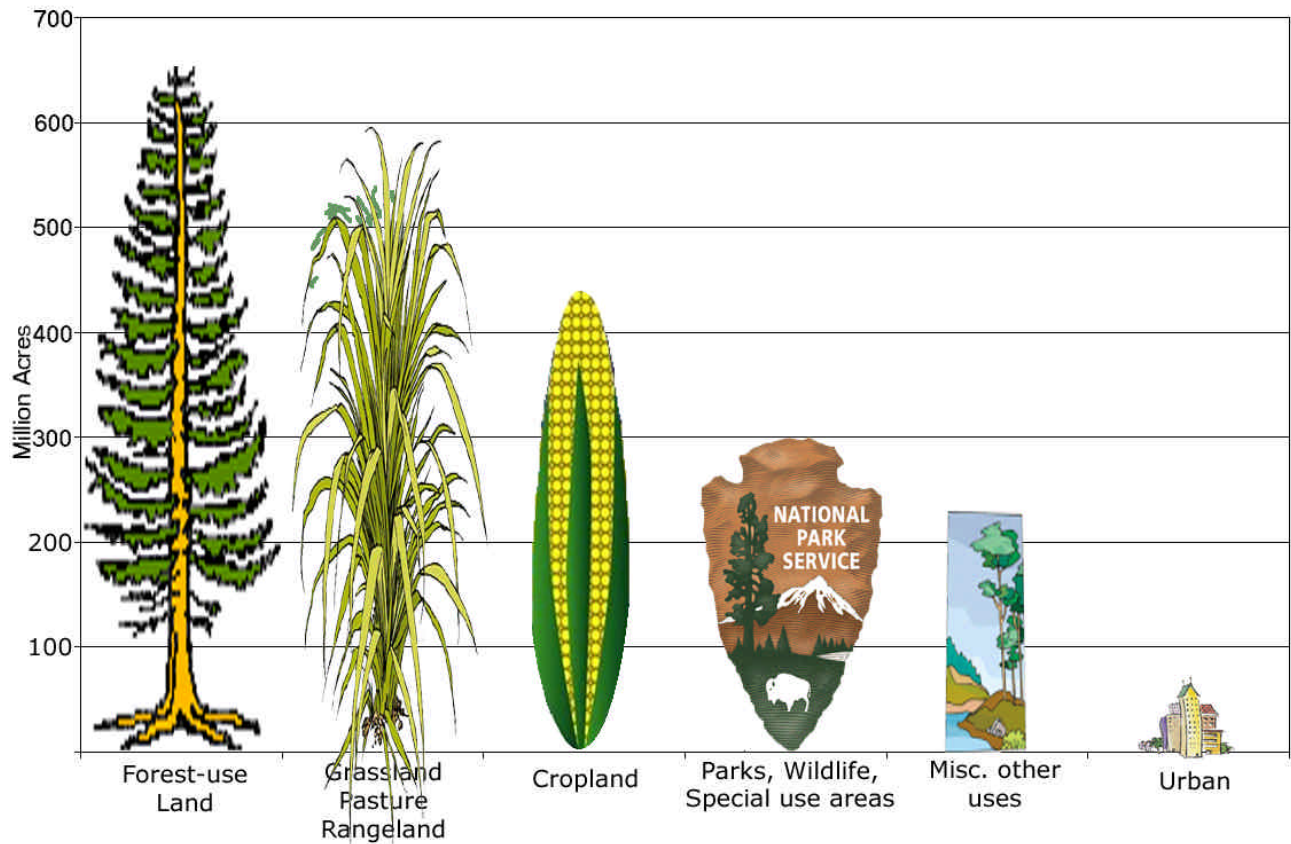
Federal, State, and local government holdings consist primarily of forestland, rangeland, and other land. Most land in Federal ownership—largely in the West—is managed by the Department of the Interior (68 percent) and the Department of Agriculture (28 percent) (U.S. GSA, 2005).

Landowning farmers make up 58 percent of the 3.4 million farmland owners. Non-operator landlords accounted for the remaining 42 percent of land in farms. Ninety-five percent of non-farm landlords were individuals/families or partnerships. Of these unincorporated landlords, 55 percent were at least 65 years old.

Small farms account for 91% of the farms yet only 27 percent of the total value of production. The smallness of most farms has implications for conservation and the environment. Small farms, however, participate widely in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Therefore, small farms play a large role in natural resource and environmental policy.²

Major uses in the United States in 2002 were forest-use land, 651 million acres (28.8 percent); grassland, pasture, and range land, 587 million acres (25.9 percent); cropland, 442 million acres (19.5 percent); special uses (primarily parks and wildlife areas), 297

million acres (13.1 percent); miscellaneous other uses, 228 million acres (10.1 percent); and urban land, 60 million acres (2.6 percent)



In 2002, land used for agricultural purposes—cropland; grassland pasture and range; forest land grazed; and land in farmsteads, farm roads, and lanes—totaled nearly 1.2 billion acres, just under 52 percent of total U.S. land area.³

The Northeast, Appalachian, Southeast, Delta States, and Lake States regions lost cropland between 1945 and 2002. Cropland conversion to urban uses is largely irreversible, so it is important to know the rate of conversion and how much of the loss is replaced from other land uses

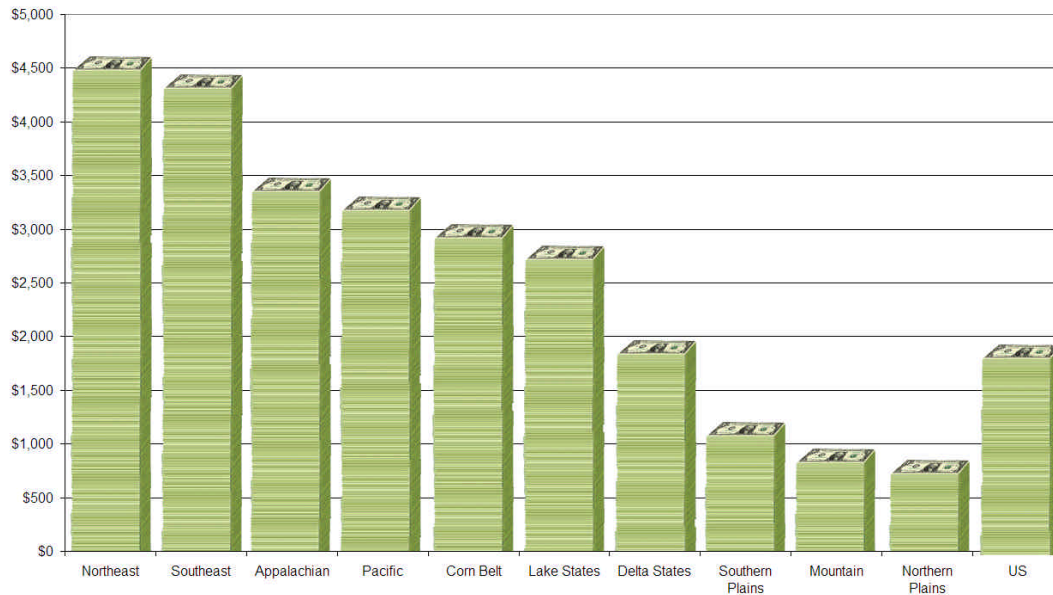
FARMLAND VALUATION

Farmland property values have climbed at double-digit rates in each of the past two years, attracting interest among investors. Farmland values rose 15% in 2005 from the prior year, and 21% in 2004. The average value of cropland climbed to \$2,390 an acre last year from \$2,110 a year earlier, while pastureland rose to an average of \$1,000 an acre from \$820. The USDA report, which was released last month, attributed the increases to low interest rates, strong demand for farmland for commercial and housing development, and interest from investors.

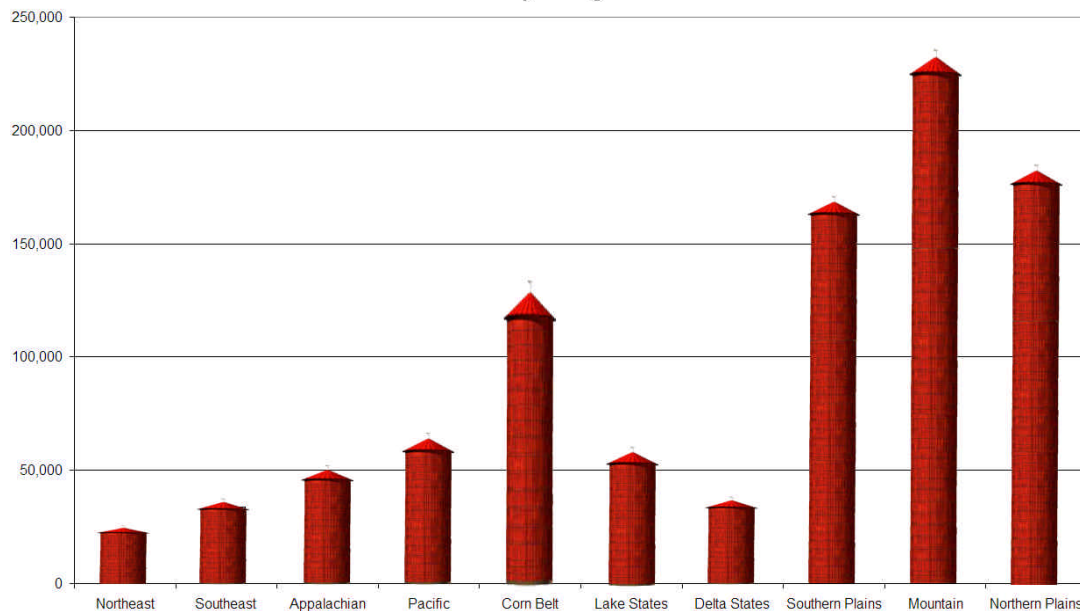
The northeast region has the highest per acre value at \$4,550 followed closely behind by the southeast region at \$4,420. At these values an average farm in these regions would be

valued at \$704,868 and \$941,712 respectively. The area identified as the corn belt comprising IL, IN, IA, MO, and OH has the greatest number of farms at 402,000 covering 118,300,000 acres with an average farm size of 294 acres. The mountain region and the northern plains has the lowest per acre value at \$944 and \$834 respectively and as a result these areas are experiencing the positive growth in farmland acres added. From 2005-2006 the mountain region had a 35.2% increase in farmland acres and the southeast region comes in second at 25.2.

Average Acre Value of Farmland by Region



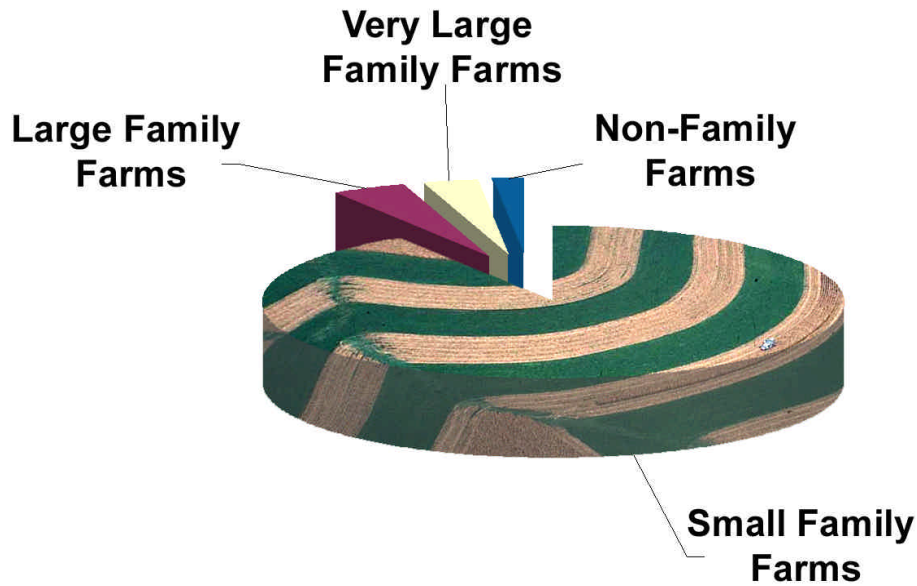
Total Farmland Acres by Region in 1000's of Acres



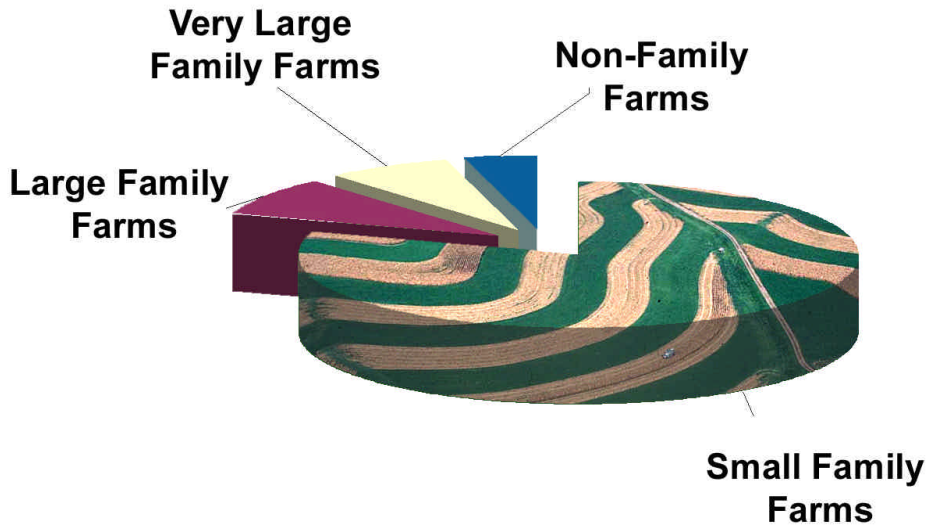
CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Small family farms constitute 91% of all farms in the US. The percentage of total cropland that is non-cultivated has continued to increase since 1982. Non-cultivated cropland accounted for almost 16 percent (58 million acres) of cropland acreage in 2003, up from 11 percent (44 million acres) in 1982. These small family farms dominate in the area of conservation program participation, 80% of the total conservation program payments are going into this sector.²

Small family farms dominate the farm count, making up 91 percent of all U.S. farms in 2003



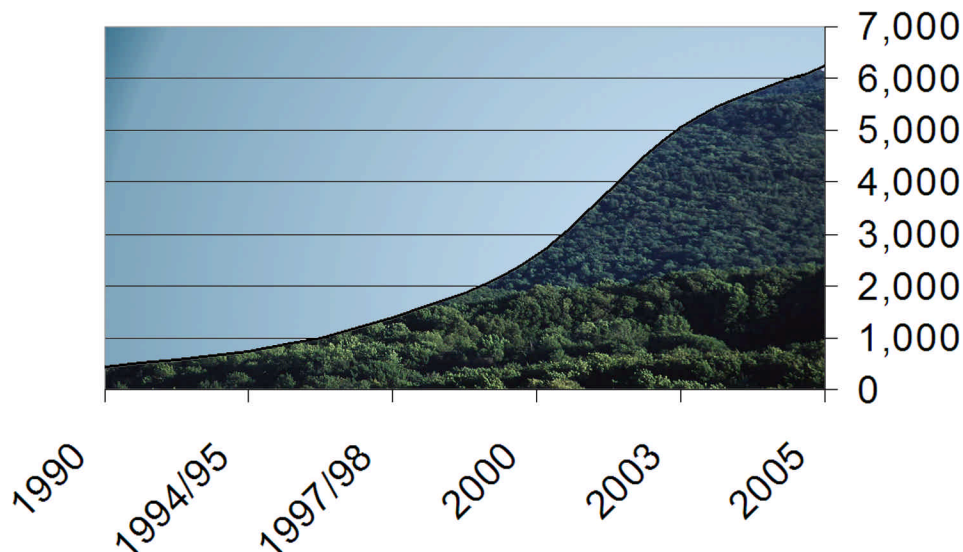
Percent of farms in Conservation programs



EASEMENTS

Acres under easement nationally have increased greatly in the past 15 years from 450,343 to 6,245,969 acres an increase of 5,795,626 acres or 93%. This factors to an average of 1,159,125 acres add yearly.⁶

Acres Under Easement (thousands)



COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET

The online population surges past 200 million in 2004. Nearly three out of four U.S. households with a phone line have access to the Internet, according to a February 2004 Nielsen/NetRatings survey. In the U.S. 204.3 million people have access to the Internet, or 74.9 percent of the population. Internet access was 66% in February 2003, a nine percentage-point rise in one year. Fast connections are on the rise, with 45.15% of Internet-connected U.S. households enjoying a high-speed connection. 54.85% of US home users dial into the Internet with "narrowband" connections of 56Kbps or less.

The Internet is becoming an increasingly vital tool in our information society. More Americans are going online to conduct such day-to-day activities as business transactions, personal correspondence, research and information gathering, and shopping. Each year, being digitally connected becomes ever more critical to economic, educational, and social advancement. Now that a large number of Americans regularly use the Internet to conduct daily activities, companies must respond by focusing a large component of their business on-line.

As previously stated, farmland represents half of all privately owned land in this country or roughly 700 million acres. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, 58% of US farms use computers and a total of 51 percent of U.S. farms now have Internet access, compared to 48 percent with Internet access in 2003.

Conclusion

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said it well; “A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people.” Our rural lands are feeling the greatest pressure from development forces in this country’s history. Exurbanization of our rapidly sprawling population growth has led to the conversion of vast amounts of rural land and natural open space. We are at the beginning of a time when our nation will face the greatest transference of land in history. Two dominating factors are driving this shift on the 61% of our nation’s land that lies in the hands of private landowners. Firstly, development of land is seven times that of population growth, and much of the land being developed is changing from its traditional agricultural, ranch, or forestland uses. Secondly, the average age of private landowners in this country is 60 years old. Many landowners, while in most instances are land-rich and cash-poor, are at a juncture, do they keep the land in the family, or sell out to development? Conservation, for the private landowner and thus our nation’s landscape, is at the foundation of the future health of our land and perpetuation of our agricultural base.

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Prepared by:
Amos Eno, Willard Dyche & Laura Mass



189 Main St.
Yarmouth, ME 04096
207.221-2753