

Dave Merrill & Lauren Leatherby, Here's How America Uses Its Land (Bloomberg L.P., July 31, 2018) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-us-land-use/>>.

The 48 contiguous states alone are a 1.9 billion-acre jigsaw puzzle of cities, farms, forests and pastures that Americans use to feed themselves, power their economy and extract value for business and pleasure.

Using surveys, satellite images and categorizations from various government agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture divides the U.S. into six major types of land. The data can't be pinpointed to a city block—each square on the map represents 250,000 acres of land. But piecing the data together state-by-state can give a general sense of how U.S. land is used.

Gathered together, cropland would take up more than a fifth of the 48 contiguous states. Pasture and rangeland would cover most of the Western U.S., and all of the country's cities and towns would fit neatly in the Northeast.

654 million acres pasture/range.
538.6 million acres forest.
391.5 million acres cropland.
168.6 million acres special use.
69.4 million acres urban.
68.9 million acres miscellaneous.

Even though urban areas make up just 3.6 percent of the total size of the 48 contiguous states, four in five Americans live, work and play there. With so much of the U.S. population in urban areas, it's little surprise that these areas contribute an outsize amount to the economy. The 10 most productive metropolitan areas alone contributed to about 40 percent of U.S. GDP in 2016.

The U.S. is becoming more urban—at an average rate of about 1 million additional acres a year. That's the equivalent of adding new urban area the size of Los Angeles, Houston and Phoenix combined. U.S. urban areas have more than quadrupled since 1945.

The USDA categorizes national parks, wildlife areas, highways, railroads and military bases as special-use areas. And another USDA land classification—miscellaneous—includes cemeteries, golf courses, marshes, deserts and other areas of “low economic value.”

More than 100 million acres of special-use areas are park and wilderness areas, where most commercial activities, such as logging, mining and grazing, are excluded.

64.4 million acres wilderness areas.
29 million acres national parks.
25 million acres defense.
21 million acres rural highways.
15.3 million acres state parks.
8 million acres farmsteads.
3 million acres airports.
3 million acres railroads.
2 million acres golf courses.

Agricultural land takes up about a fifth of the country.

391.5 million acres croplands.
127.4 million acres livestock feed.
77.3 million acres food we eat.
62.8 million acres other grain/feed exports.
52 million acres idle/fallow.
38.1 million acres ethanol/biodiesel.
21.5 million acres wheat exports.
13.6 million acres cotton.

Yet the actual land area used to grow the food Americans eat is much smaller—only about the size of Indiana, Illinois and half of Iowa combined. More than a third of the entire corn crop is devoted to ethanol production. Most cropland is used for livestock feed, exports or is left idle to let the land recover.

While the U.S. benefits from an overall agricultural trade surplus, Americans imported 15 percent of their food and beverage products in 2016. More than 30 percent of the fresh fruits and vegetables Americans consume come from other countries, predominantly Mexico and Canada. The amount of U.S. land used to produce citrus fruits alone is larger than Rhode Island.

More than one-third of U.S. land is used for pasture—by far the largest land-use type in the contiguous 48 states. And nearly 25 percent of that land is administered by the federal government, with most occurring in the West. That land is open to grazing for a fee.

The federal government manages livestock grazing on 158 million acres.

There's a single, major occupant on all this land: cows. Between pastures and cropland used to produce feed, 41 percent of U.S. land in the contiguous states revolves around livestock.

41% of the contiguous U.S. is used for feeding livestock.
654 million acres pasture/range.
127 million acres livestock feed crops.

Forestland is the last major category of land categorized by the USDA. Unprotected forests and timberland constitute a quarter of the contiguous U.S.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, timber harvests typically occur on about 11 million acres each year. But because of regrowth, the volume of U.S. timber stock grew by about 1 percent annually from 2007 to 2012. Weyerhaeuser Co. is the largest private owner of timberlands in the U.S. With 12.4 million acres, the company controls 2.3 percent of all commercially available timber, an area nearly the size of West Virginia.

538.6 million acres forest/timberland.
Weyerhaeuser owns or controls 2.3% of contiguous-U.S. timberland.

Putting all those pieces together, this map gives you a rough sense of all the ways U.S. land is used. Much of U.S. land serves specific purposes, such as the 2 million acres devoted to golf courses or the 3 million acres for airports.

On a percentage basis, urban creep outpaces growth in all other land-use categories. Another growth area: land owned by wealthy families. According to *The Land Report* magazine, since 2008 the amount of land owned by the 100 largest private landowners has grown from 28 million acres to 40 million, an area larger than the state of Florida.

Methodology Land use classifications are based on data published in 2017 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service in a report called the Major Uses of Land in the United States (MLU). Data from the report provide total land-use acreage estimates for each state across six broad categories. Those totals are displayed per 250,000 acres.

Data from Alaska and Hawaii are excluded from the analysis. Special-use land and forestland make up the biggest land types in those states.

Bloomberg referenced the USDA data against estimates from the National Land Cover Database to generally locate these categories within each state.

Miscellaneous uses are defined as wetlands, rural residential lands, non-harvestable forests, desert, tundra and barren land of low economic value. Unlike all other land-use categories in the USDA data, a component breakdown for miscellaneous uses by state is not provided in the MLU. To locate miscellaneous areas, Bloomberg referred to the National Land Cover Database to generally calculate and locate acreage by miscellaneous uses. "Rural residential lands" in the USDA data make up most of the 69 million-acre miscellaneous-use category. This category does not equally correlate to data in the National Land Cover Database, so Bloomberg subtracted the total of the other miscellaneous components to arrive at a rough estimate of "rural residential lands"—about 50 million acres.

Total pasture/range areas are proportionally divided by animal group based on National Agricultural Statistics Service livestock counts.

Data showing the 100 largest landowning families are based on descriptions of acreage and land type in *The Land Report* magazine. Representative amounts of acreage were subtracted from private timber and cropland/range to show this category, which is not a part of the USDA data.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service: Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2012; U.S. Department of the Interior, National Land Cover Database, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau; State governments; stateparks.org; American Farmland Trust; Golf Course Superintendents Association of America; USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service; USDA Census of Agriculture; U.S. Bureau of Land Management; U.S. Forest Service; Weyerhaeuser Co.; The Land Report magazine.