

Texas has more farms, fewer acres, new study shows

Online trend visualizer helps depict state's land use

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COLLEGE STATION - The loss and fragmentation of Texas' farms, ranches and forests is part of a continued trend that highlights the importance of rural lands in maintaining the state's natural resources and economic base, according to a newly released study.

The study shows that lands classified as farms, ranches and forests declined in 156 of Texas's 254 counties between 1997 and 2006. In all, there was a loss of 2.1 million acres of agricultural lands since 1997, the report notes.

"When you talk about the infrastructure of the economy and life in Texas, land is it," said Dr. Neal Wilkins, one of the study's authors and director of the Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Natural Resources.

The study, commissioned by American Farmland Trust, indicated that about 50 percent of the land converted from agriculture to other uses was concentrated in the state's 50 highest-growth counties. These counties lost 1,084,566 acres while increasing in population by 4,017,765 residents.

"In some regions, including South Texas and the Edwards Plateau, our state's rural lands continue to be divided into smaller acreages, and this may have consequences for future profitability" Wilkins said. "According to the data, only 50 percent of farms and ranches below 500 acres showed a net profit during 2007. In addition, these fragmented ownerships are more likely to be converted to non-native pastures and become a challenge for managing wildlife and other natural resources."

While the report showed an increase of about 1,900 new farms and ranches in Texas, he noted, the average size dropped to 527 acres in 2007 from 585 acres 10 years earlier.

"Where traditional agriculture has declined in profitability, landowners have faced a hard decision of having to sell parcels of land," Wilkins explained. "When that happens, the open land becomes fragmented, and the consequence is the loss of rural lands to support our natural resources."

American Farmland Trust's Texas advisor, Blair Fitzsimmons, agreed.

"Agricultural lands provide significant public benefits such as clean, abundant water, carbon sequestration and clean air," she said. "This study is a wake-up call that those public benefits are disappearing."

One unique feature of the study, however, is a new tool developed to aid policymakers and local officials in making land-use decisions, Wilkins pointed out.

The Texas Land Trends Web site, <http://www.txlandtrends.org/>, links to a trend visualizer - an exhaustive database that enables one to view 10-year land-use trends by Texas county, area (such as I-35 corridor), river basin or ecoregion.

"This is an amazing new way to access information and visualize what it means," Wilkins said. "It makes the information local and personal."

Wilkins and his team spent about nine months gathering information from readily available sources -- including the U.S. Census, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts -- to access the land use data for over 1,000 school districts, for example. That data was combined with natural resource expertise. Computer programmers and potential user groups assisted in making the Web site easy to navigate.

Among the other overall trends reported in the study:

- Texas now has about 142 million acres of private farms, ranches and forests, equaling 84 percent of the state's entire land area.
- The state has more than 247,000 farms and ranches.
- The land base for Texas agriculture decreased by as much as 2 percent between 1997 and 2007.
- In high-growth areas, about 270 acres of agricultural land are converted to non-agricultural use for every 1,000 new residents added to the population.
- As of 2007, operations with less than 100 acres occupied about 3 percent of the state's land but more than 50 percent of the farms and ranches.
- Texas land values increased about 140 percent to an average of \$1,196 per acre, though much higher values are found near metropolitan areas.

Wilkins said some of the regions with the fastest losses to fragmentation were in the Trans Pecos, Edwards Plateau and South Texas regions where more than 2.8 million acres were chopped into small- and mid-sized parcels since 1997.

One positive note, however, is in the northern areas of the state where some 2.5 million acres were consolidated into larger operations, he added. For understanding how remaining land is being used, Wilkins pointed out, the online trend visualizer provides

data not only on totals but specifically on irrigated cropland, dry cropland, non-native pasture, native rangeland, wildlife management, forests and other uses. Each of these also can be determined by county, area, river basin or ecoregion.

The largest overall land-use category is native rangeland at 92.6 million acres, the report noted.

Another trend is an increase in the use of land for wildlife management which the report indicated resulted from state legislation in 1996 that provided tax appraisal benefits for that category. Wildlife management land use now accounts for 2.37 million acres statewide.

"We hope this tool will be useful in helping people understand the trends in Texas land use and how that will impact society," Wilkins added.

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The Institute of Renewable Natural Resources is part of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas AgriLife Research and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.