

# THE 2017 NRI: CHANGES IN LAND COVER/USE

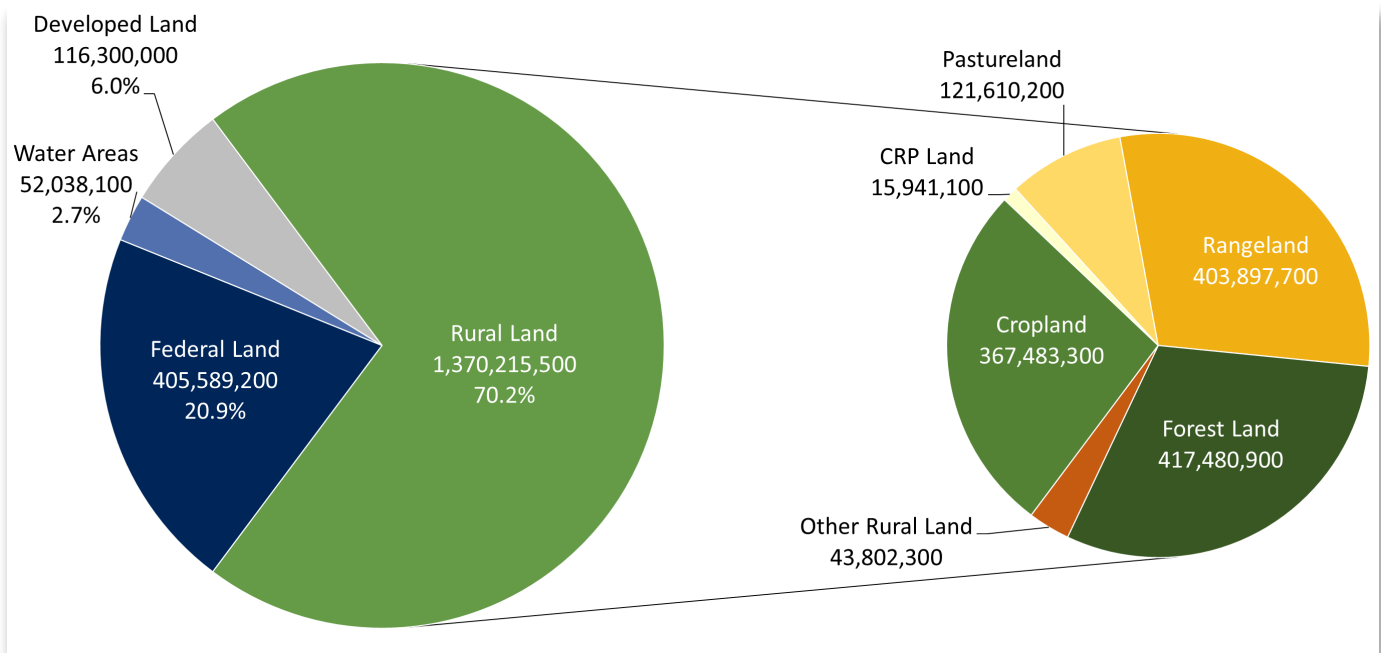
## BACKGROUND

The National Resources Inventory (NRI) is an appraisal of natural resource conditions and trends on non-federal land conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The 2017 NRI summary report, released in September 2020, includes details about land cover and use, soils, erosion, wetlands and conservation practices for the 48 contiguous states, Hawaii and Caribbean Territories. It also documents changes in land cover/use at the national level for six reporting periods: 1982–1997, 1997–2002, 2002–2007, 2007–2012, 2012–2017, and 1982–2017.

## TOTAL SURFACE AREA & LAND COVER/USE CATEGORIES

According to the 2017 NRI, the contiguous 48 states, Hawaii and the Caribbean Territories cover 1.94 billion acres of land and water. Roughly 70 percent is non-federal rural land, which is comprised of: cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forest land, other rural land, and land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). American Farmland Trust uses the term agricultural land to refer to land cover/use categories that are readily available for agricultural production: cropland, pastureland, rangeland, and land in CRP.

**Fig. 1 Total surface area & land cover/land use categories, acres, 2017**



## RURAL LAND LOST TO DEVELOPMENT

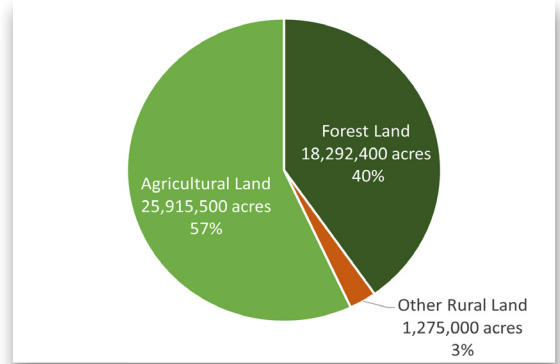
The United States developed about 45 million acres of non-federal rural land in the 48 conterminous states, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands between 1982 and 2017. This resulted in a net increase in developed land of about 44 million acres bringing the total to more than 116 million acres of developed land by 2017. Thirty-eight percent of all developed land was converted from 1982 to 2017.

## AGRICULTURAL LAND LOST TO DEVELOPMENT

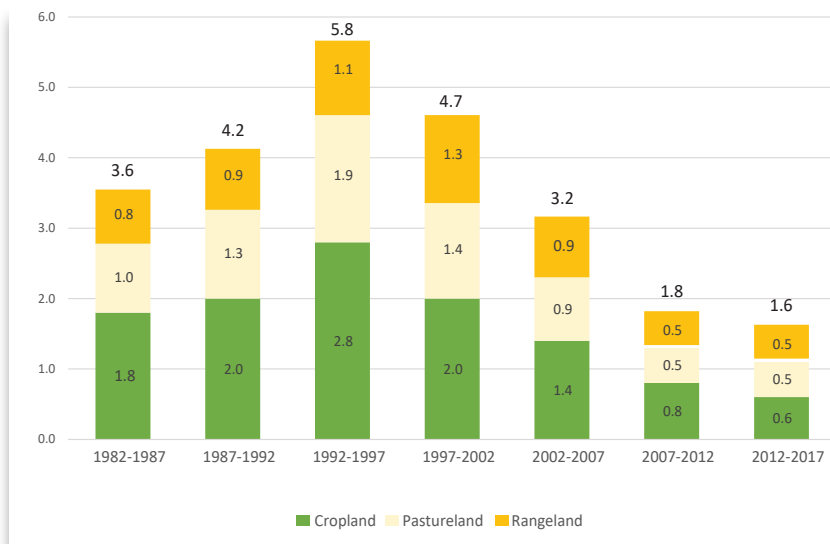
The United States converted nearly 26 million acres of agricultural land to development from 1982 to 2017—an area larger than the state of Kentucky. Fifty-seven percent of new development occurred on agricultural land while only 40 percent converted forest land. What’s more, the U.S. converted a disproportionate amount of its agricultural land, which accounted for just 50 percent of the total surface area of non-federal and federal land and water areas in 1982.

Conversion of agricultural land to development has continued to slow from the peak between 1992 and 1997. Even so, the NRI reports that the United States converted 6.9 million acres of agricultural land to developed land between 2002 and 2017.

**Fig. 2 Sources of newly developed non-federal rural land, acres, 1982-2017**



**Fig. 3 Sources of newly developed agricultural land, millions of acres, 1982-2017**



This estimate is in line with findings from AFT’s recent report, *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*. The report’s spatial analysis, which incorporates NRI data, shows that between 2001 and 2016, 11 million acres of agricultural land were converted to urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) land uses. AFT’s LDR classification encompasses areas where the average housing density is more concentrated than the level at which agriculture is typically viable. This threshold varies by county and is tied to the range of farm sizes reported by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. The NRI also tracks residential development including where development is as dispersed as one housing unit per 10 to 20 acres. But due

to differences in definitions and methods, AFT’s LDR category identifies more agricultural land compromised by low-density residential development.

To learn more about AFT’s analysis visit: [www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat](http://www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat).  
 Access the NRI at: [www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/nra/nri/results/](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/nra/nri/results/).

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2020. Summary Report: 2017 National Resources Inventory, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington, DC, and Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.  
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/nra/nri/results/>