



| SYSTEM DIMENSIONS | CHEMICAL AND PHYSICAL | BIOLOGICAL COMPONENTS | HUMAN USES |
|-------------------|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Extent | Nutrients, Carbon, Oxygen | Plants and Animals | Food, Fiber, and Water |
| Pattern | Contaminants Physical | Communities Ecological Productivity | Recreation and Other Services |

● Total Cropland (including pasture and hayland)

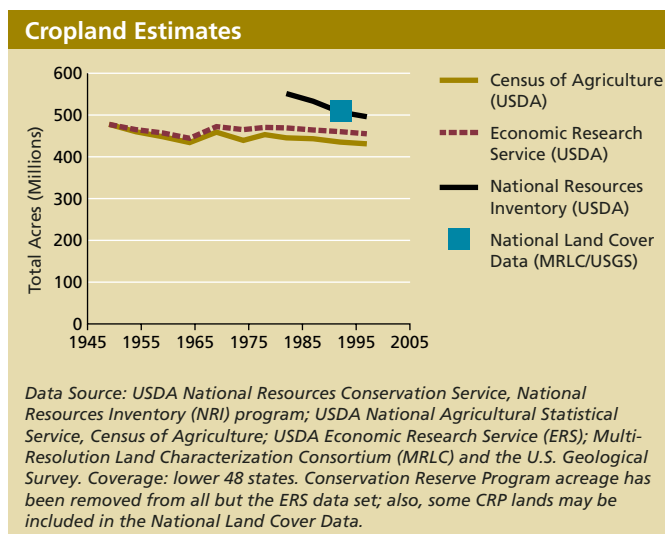
What Is This Indicator, and Why Is It Important?

This indicator reports the amount of land used for crops, including pasture and hay. Acreage that is enrolled in long-term set-aside programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is not considered to be part of this indicator.

Agriculture is a major component of the U.S. economy, and land is the most basic resource in farming. In addition, the size of and fluctuations in the agricultural land base provide important baseline information for other indicators, such as Farmland Landscape (p. 92).

What Do the Data Show?

Cropland, including pasture and haylands, covered between 430 and 500 million acres, or about a quarter of total U.S. land area (excluding Alaska) in 1997. Cropland acreage has declined over the past half century. Unfortunately, the multiple sources of cropland acreage information provide estimates that are not always consistent. Two sources—the Census of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service (ERS)—show a decline in acreage from a peak in 1949 (about 5% for ERS and 10% for the Census). In contrast, the National Resources Inventory (NRI) reports greater cropland acreage and a 10% drop over the much shorter time period from 1982 to 1997. The National Land Cover Data agree with the NRI for the single time point available.



Discussion Note that even if overall acreage changes little, different parts of the country may experience sharp increases or decreases in cropland acreage. In addition, even apparently small changes in total acreage may involve millions of acres of land (see the national extent indicator, p. 40).

Estimates of the amount of land devoted to farming differ because different programs use different methods to acquire, define, and analyze their data. We are aware of no overall reconciliation among these estimates.

Cropland is a flexible resource: it may be used for crops one year, be left idle for one or many years, and then returned to production. Changes in government programs or crop prices may cause land to be idled for short periods or to be used for different crops. In contrast, long-term changes in cropland acreage may result from conversion of land to other uses, including CRP set-asides and development.

The technical note for this indicator is on page 229.