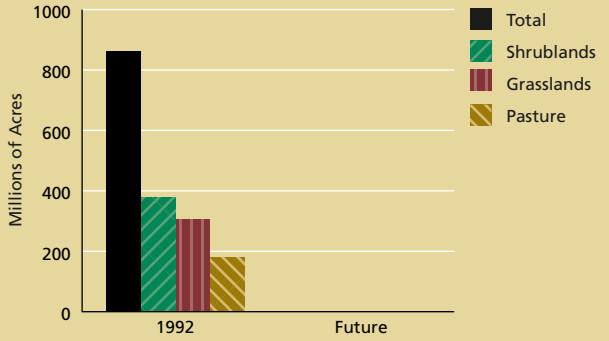
Area of Grasslands and Shrublands

What Is This Indicator, and Why Is It Important? This indicator reports the acreage of U.S. grasslands and shrublands (although data are not available for Hawaii). Because grasslands and shrublands are one of the largest ecosystem types in the United States, it is especially important to document changes in their extent.

"Grasslands and shrublands" are any lands that are dominated by grass or shrubs. This includes not only the grasslands and shrublands of the American West, but also coastal meadows, grasslands and shrublands in Florida, mountain meadows, hot and cold deserts, tundra, and similar areas in all states. It also includes pasture- and haylands, which share important characteristics with less-managed grasslands. However, since these areas are also important in describing the area of farmland, they are also included in the extent figures for farmlands (p. 91); see also the national extent indicator (p. 40).

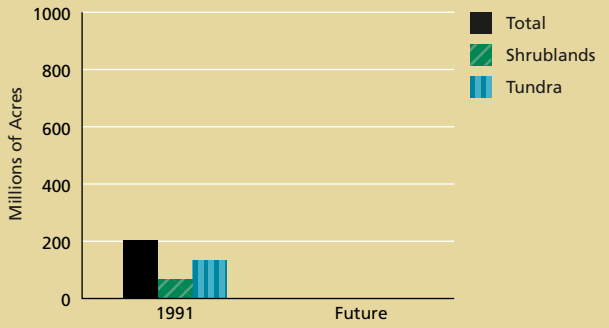
What Do the Data Show? In 1992, there were 861 million acres of grasslands and shrublands in the lower 48 states, and 205 million acres in Alaska, for a total of just over 1 billion acres. In the lower 48 states, there were 377 million acres of shrubland, 306 million acres of grassland, and 178 million acres of pasture- and haylands. In Alaska, tundra occupied about 135 million acres and other shrublands about 70 million acres.

Area of Grasslands and Shrublands, Lower 48 States



Data Source: Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics (MRLC) Consortium, USGS EROS Data Center. Coverage: lower 48 states.

Area of Grasslands and Shrublands, Alaska



Data Source: Flemming (1996), USGS EROS Data Center. Coverage: Alaska.

Discussion No consistent, nationwide data are available on the change in acreage of grasslands and shrublands. Researchers have estimated that there were between 900 million and 1 billion acres of grasslands and shrublands in the lower 48 states before European settlement, so between 40 million and 140 million acres had been converted to other uses by 1992. However, many pastures are managed in such a way that little of their original grassland character remains. Thus, the area of relatively unmanaged, "natural," grasslands and shrublands has declined more—perhaps substantially more—than the overall figures would indicate. In addition, U.S. Department of Agriculture data indicate that from 1982 to1997, nonfederal grasslands and shrublands declined by about 11 million acres, although the rate of conversion to other land uses slowed substantially after 1992.

The technical note for this indicator is on page 256.