Current Land Use Trends[1]

Texas Coastal Region

Introduction

The Texas Coastal region is comprised of 18 counties: Aransas, Brazoria, Calhoun, Cameron, Chambers, Galveston, Harris, Jackson, Jefferson, Kenedy, Kleberg, Matagorda, Nueces, Orange, Refugio, San Patricio, Victoria, and Willacy. These counties account for 6.8 million of the 142 million acres of private farms, ranches, and forestlands in Texas and are approximately 5% of the state's private land use area. This region provides substantial economic, environmental, and recreational benefits to the state's population.

Coastal Trends

Ownership Size. By the end of 2007, the USDA Census of Agriculture reported 14,712 farming and ranching operations in Texas coastal counties. This represents a 9% increase since 1997, equating to an approximate gain of 119 new working farms and ranches annually. With the gain in the number of farms and ranches in this region, the land base for agriculture on the coast has also increased by 2%. However, average ownership size declined from 496 acres in 1997 to 467 acres in 2007.

- By 2007, smaller operations (<100 acres) accounted for over 65% of the coast's total farming and ranching operations, while occupying only 3.6% of the total land area. Furthermore, large operations (>2,000 acres) accounted for less than 5% of the coast's total farming and ranching operations, but occupied 65% of the total land area.

  This class of smaller operations (<100 acres) has increased by 21% between 1997 and 2007, while adding 6% total land area in the coastal zone. Meanwhile, large ownership (>2,000 acres) increased by 9% and showed an 11% increase in total acres (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change in the number of acres by farm and ranch size class from 1997-2007 for the Coastal Region. *Data Source: USDA Census of Agriculture.*

- The amount of land in mid-sized farms and ranches (500 to 2,000 acres) located in the coastal region has continued to decline at the rate of about 23,000 acres per year, following the statewide trend.
- Similar to large ownerships in the coastal region, statewide large ownerships (>2,000 acres) account for less than 4% of all farms and ranches, but occupy about 62% of the state's total farm and ranchland. These larger operations, both coastal and statewide, have slightly increased in total number since 1997. While large operations have experienced an overall decrease in land area statewide; land area for large operations along the coast have increased by 449,320 acres or 11%.

Land Use. The most prevailing land use type along the coast is native rangeland at over 3.5 million acres. Since 1997, the accumulated localized loss of coastal native rangeland has exceeded 527,000 acres. In addition, the area in dry (non-irrigated) cropland has declined by 373,000 acres.

The most notable trend along the Texas coast is the conversion of native rangeland and dry cropland to non-native pasture and irrigated cropland. There are now over 379,000 acres of non-native pasture and 836,214 acres of irrigated cropland in the coastal region, an increase of 78,201 and 99,703 acres since 1997, respectively.

A more recent trend in land use is a shift to "wildlife management" following state legislation in 1996 that created the official land use category for tax appraisal purposes. Since then, land along the coast classified as being in wildlife management has increased from 2,723 acres to 438,762 acres.

Land Values. In 2007, the average appraised market value of farms, ranches, and forestlands along the coast was $1,362 per acre compared to a $1,196 per acre average for the state. On average, this represents a 59% increase in appraised market value over the 10-year period. As expected, the increase in market value was concentrated near the metropolitan areas of Houston and Brownsville (Figure 2).

Loss Of Agricultural Lands. According to accumulated data from Texas County Appraisal Districts, over 230,000 acres of farms, ranches, and forestlands in the coastal region were converted to other uses from 1997 to 2007. Over 38% of this land conversion was related to growth and development associated with population expansion in the coastal region's three highest growth counties—Cameron, Brazoria, and Chambers. During this period, 88,215 acres were lost from the agricultural land base surrounding Brownsville and the greater Houston area.

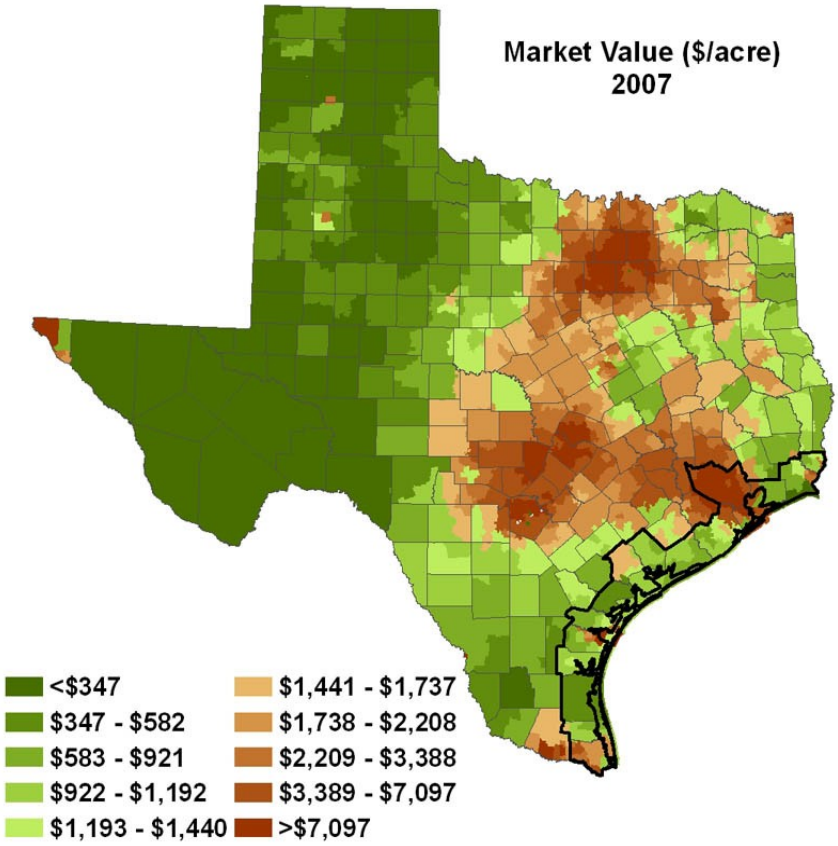

Figure 2. Market Value per acre in 2007. *Data Source: County Appraisal District Data.*

[1]Wilkins, R. Neal, Amy G. Snelgrove, Blair C. Fitzsimons, Brent M. Stevener, Kevin L. Skow, Ross E. Anderson, Amanda M. Dube, Debbie Danford. Current Land Use Trends, *Texas Land Trends*. Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Natural Resources. 2009. Texas AgriLife Extension.