

Current Land Use Trends¹

Rio Grande

Introduction

The Rio Grande Region of Texas is comprised of two counties: Cameron and Hidalgo. These two counties account for 1 million of the 142 million acres of private farms, ranches and forestlands in Texas and are less than 1% of the state's private land use area. This area of Texas provides substantial economic, environmental, and recreational benefits to the state's entire population.

Rio Grande Trends

Ownership Size. By the end of 2007, the USDA Census of Agriculture reported 3,392 farming and ranching operations in the Rio Grande Region. This represents a 21% increase since 1997 or an approximate gain of 60 new working farms and ranches annually. Additionally, the land base for agriculture in this region has increased by almost 3%, while the average ownership size has decreased from 373 acres in 1997, to 316 acres in 2007.

- By 2007, smaller operations (<100 acres) accounted for 72% of the Rio Grande Region's total farming and ranching operations, while occupying only 5% of the total land area. Furthermore, the number of large operations (>2000 acres) accounted for about 4% of the Region's total farming and ranching operations, but occupied 55% of the total land area.

This class of smaller operations (<100 acres) has increased by 31% between 1997 and 2007, while adding almost 13% total land area in the Rio Grande Region. Meanwhile, the number of large operations (>2,000 acres), increased by about 23% and showed a 4.3% 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 Rio Grande. Data Source: USDA Census of Agriculture.

- The amount of land in mid-sized farms and ranches (500 to 2,000 acres) located in the Rio Grande Region has increased at the rate of about 1,400 acres per year.
- Large ownerships (>2,000 acres) within this region have increased by 23% since 1997. These large operations experienced a 24,489 acre or 4.3% increase in land area.

Land Use. The prevailing category of land use in the Rio Grande Region continues to be irrigated cropland at over 353,000 acres. However, since 1997, the accumulated localized loss of irrigated cropland in the Region has exceeded 55,000 acres.

A notable trend in the Rio Grande Region is the increase of non-native pasture. There are now 101,534 acres of non-native pasture, an increase of 24,264 acres since 1997. Furthermore, native rangeland has decreased by 26,951 acres during the same time period.

A more recent trend in land use statewide has been the shift to “wildlife management” following state legislation, promulgated in 1996, that created the official land use category for tax appraisal purposes. However, in contrast to the statewide trend, no land in the Rio Grande Region is classified as being in wildlife management.

Land Values. In 2007, the average appraised market value of farms, ranches and forestlands in Texas was \$1,196 per acre. However, in the Rio Grande Region the average appraised market value exceeded \$2,900 per acre. On average, this represents a 100% increase in appraised market value over the 10-year period for this region. As expected, this increase in market values was concentrated in the major metropolitan growth areas surrounding McAllen and Brownsville (Figure 2).

Loss Of Agricultural Lands. According to accumulated data from Texas County Appraisal Districts, 88,025 acres of farms and ranches in the Rio Grande Region were converted to other uses from 1997 to 2007. Some of this land conversion is contributed to growth and development associated with population expansion in the Cameron and Hidalgo counties.

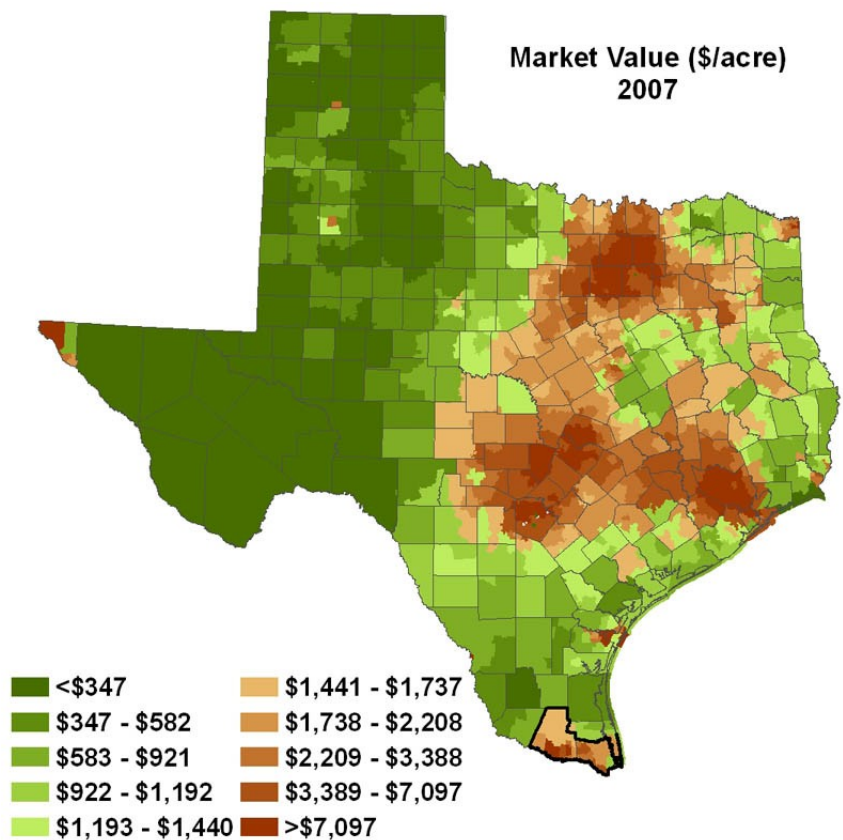


Figure 2. Market Value per acre 2007. Data Source: County Appraisal District Data.

¹Wilkins, 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.