

# Current Land Use Trends<sup>1</sup>

## Greater Houston Area

### Introduction

The Greater Houston area is comprised of eight counties: Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery, and Waller. These counties account for 2.5 million of the 142 million acres of private farms, ranches and forestlands in Texas and are approximately 1.8% 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.

### Greater Houston Trends

**Ownership Size.** By the end of 2007, the USDA Census of Agriculture reported 12,651 farming and ranching operations in the Greater Houston area. This represents a 10% increase since 1997, or an approximate gain of 120 new working farms and ranches annually. Although there has been a gain in the number of farms and ranches in this area, the land base for agriculture around Houston has decreased by 8%. Additionally, average ownership size declined from 217 acres in 1997 to 180 acres in 2007.

- By 2007, smaller operations (<100 acres) accounted for almost 75% of the Greater Houston area's total farming and ranching operations, while occupying only 11% of the total land area. Furthermore, the number of large operations (>2000 acres) accounted for about 1.5% of the Greater Houston Area's total farming and ranching operations, but occupied 38% of the total land area.

This class of smaller operations (<100 acres) increased by 21% between 1997 and 2007, while adding 6.6% total land area to this region. Meanwhile, the number of large operations (>2000 acres), decreased by about 1% and showed a 5% decrease in total acres (Figure 1).

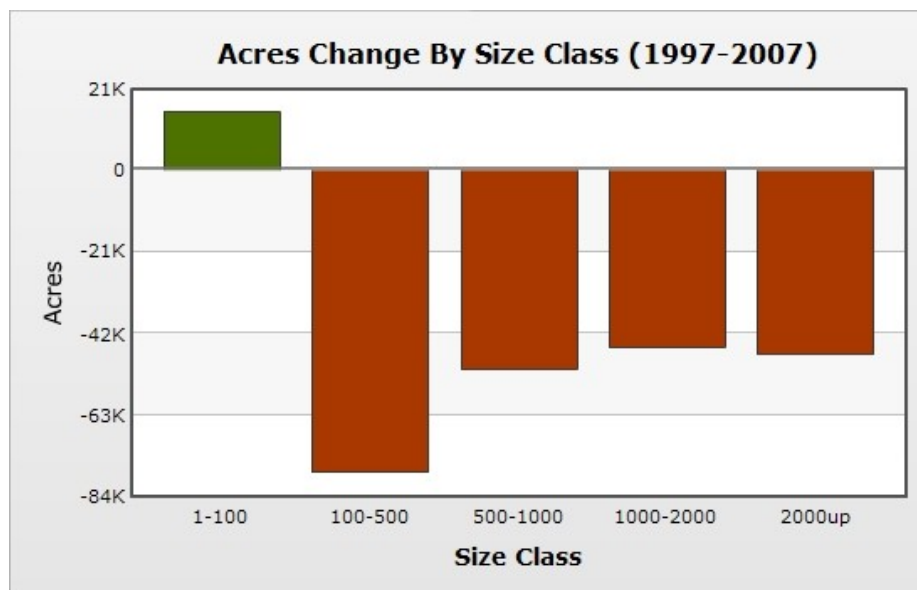


Figure 1. Change in the number of acres by farm and ranch size class from 1997-2007 for the Houston Area. Data Source: USDA Census of Agriculture.

- The amount of land in mid-sized farms and ranches (500 to 2,000 acres) located in the Greater Houston Area has continued to decline at the rate of almost 9,700 acres per year, following the statewide trend.
- Large ownerships (>2,000 acres) within the Greater Houston Area have declined by 1% since 1997. These large operations experienced a 47,350 acre or 5% decrease in land area.

**Land Use.** The prevailing category of land use in the Greater Houston Area continues to be native rangeland at over 1.1 million acres. However, since 1997, the accumulated localized loss of native rangeland in the Houston Area has exceeded 100,000 acres.

The most notable trend in the Greater Houston Area is the increase in non-native pasture and the decrease of irrigated cropland. There are now 270,052 acres of non-native pasture, an increase of 88,878 acres since 1997. Irrigated crop land has declined by 132,711 acres since 1997 for a total of 246,186 acres.

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 in the Greater Houston Area classified as being in wildlife management has increased from 1,116 acres to 20,118 acres.

**Land Values.** In 2007, the average appraised market value of farms, ranches and forestlands in Texas was \$1,196 per acre. However, in the Greater Houston Area the average appraised market value was \$3,165 per acre. This represents a 106% increase in appraised market value over the 10-year period for that area. As expected, this increase in market values was concentrated in the major metropolitan growth areas surrounding Harris County (Figure 2).

**Loss Of Agricultural Lands.** According to accumulated data from Texas County Appraisal Districts, over 209,000 acres of farms and ranches in the Greater Houston Area were converted to other uses from 1997 to 2007. Over 43% of this land conversion was related to growth and development associated with population expansion in the Greater Houston Area’s three highest growth counties— Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Waller. During this period, 91,442 acres were lost from the agricultural land base in the Greater Houston Area.

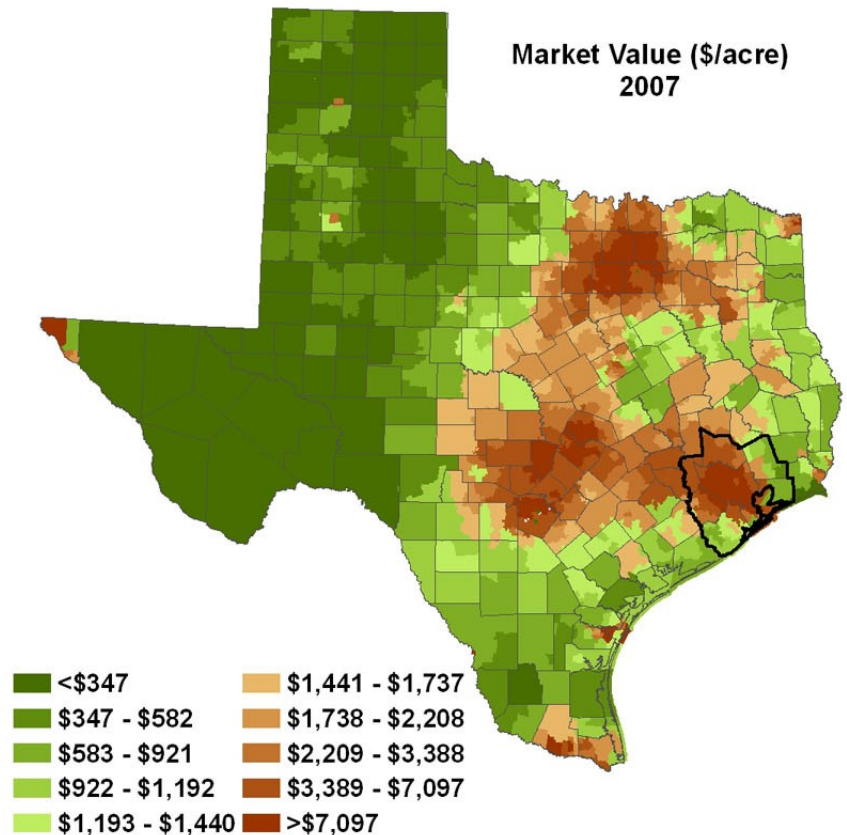


Figure 2. Market Value per acre 2007. Data Source: County Appraisal District Data.

<sup>1</sup>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.