Alabama Farmland and Forestland Figures Over Time

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Official (USDA and State of Alabama) statistics on farmland and forestland in Alabama can seem to tell different stories. This piece on the BC website clarifies what facts the different statistics refer to, and helps clarify changes in Alabama rural practices in the last 60 years. The original statistics can be obtained from the Mann Library of Cornell University by searching on the agency and document numbers indicated. (http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/usda.html).

Land changes in Alabama can be summarized as follows:

-Most Alabama farmers have always buffered against risk by using some of their acreage for tree growing and some for row crops, other crops, and animal rearing. The exact blend depended on the local geography and on the needs of the farmer. Often, farmers planted some acreage in light tree cover and raised cattle on the same acreage.

-Since as far back as the middle 19th century, many small farms in Alabama were located in hilly areas or other marginal areas not much suited to row crops. These areas could sustain some forest cover and a few cattle.

-Beginning with mechanization in the 1920s, the small marginal farms became even less economically viable and gradually began to be abandoned, converted into other uses, or consolidated into larger more viable farms.

-Nevertheless, agricultural activity, and the extent of agricultural land, probably both peaked in the 1950s, likely as a result of World War II. After the war, the process of abandoning, converting or consolidating small farms picked up speed again.

-In the 1940s, about 8.2 million acres were in pure cropland and about 4.9 million acres were in pure forestland. About 13.6 million acres were in light forest that was also grazed by cattle.

-As time went by, the amount of land in pure row crops fell to about half the original amount, or about 4.5 million acres. The amount of land in pure forest without grazing increased over four-fold to about 20.3 million acres.

-Most of the increase of forestland probably came about through the conversion of the mixed-use, light forest, light grazing land into pure forestland. Owners of that land removed the cattle and replanted the land in fast-growing tree species yielding pulp products.

-The old, mixed-use, light forest, light grazing land had originally been double classified as both farmland and forestland. Probably, the land was held by people who had been farmers, and still thought of themselves as farmers, but who in fact had moved on to other economic activities.

-Depending on the emphasis preferred and on what statistics are chosen (especially in regards to the old mixed-use, light forest, light grazing land) different stories can be told.

Table 1 tells the story without taking into account the difference between cropland and other kinds of farmland: (a) the amount of agricultural land and the number of farms in Alabama peaked about 1950; (b) both declined rapidly until about 1982; (c) since then both have declined less slowly. Farmland in Alabama declined from about 21.3 million acres in 1950 to about 9.8 million acres in 1992.

Table 1. Land In Farms (in acres, all numbers x 1000)
USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS), "Farm Real Estate Historical Series Data, 1950-1992", Statistical Bulletin No. 855

Year	A. Number of Farms	B. Land in Farms
1950	220	21300
1954	168	21200
1959	129	17600
1964	102	16200
1969	85	15000
1974	78	14600
1978	59	12500
1982	55	11800
1987	49	10700
1992	46	9800

Table 2 provides a somewhat fuller context. Alabama has about 32.5 million acres of land area in total (column A). Slight reductions in the total amount over time have come primarily from the conversion of land into ponds, lakes and reservoirs. Because many small land categories have been omitted from the table, the figures for the various land categories do not add up to the total.

Table 2. Land Use (in acres, all numbers x 1000)
USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS), "Major Land Uses 1945-1992", Stock No. 89003

Year	A. Total	B. Crop Only	C. Total Forest	D. Forest Use, Not Grazed	E. Woodland as Pasture	F. Cropland as Pasture	G. Pasture Not crop Not Forest
1945	32690	8266	18748	4889	13859	854	2440
1949	32690	8271	18817	8305	10512	1598	1707
1954	32690	7481	20766	10785	9981	1654	2454
1959	32678	6028	20771	16000	4771	1413	3075
1964	32545	5211	21749	17241	4508	1243	2829
1969	32452	5885	21748	19437	2311	2100	2410
1974	32452	5797	21333	19444	1889	2135	2917
1978	32452	5888	21333	19452	1881	1798	1949
1982	32491	5642	21179	19479	1700	1474	1865
1987	32491	4803	21659	19965	1694	1456	1935
1992	32480	4539	21941	20337	1604	1535	1917

The amount of pure cropland (column B) has declined by about half but the decline has slowed and the amount of pure cropland that remains appears to be fairly steady. This remaining acreage is land that can be successfully farmed in competition with regions like the Midwest (such as portions of the flat areas around Huntsville or of the "Black Belt" prairie).

Total Forest (column C) = Forest Use, Not Grazed (column D) + Woodland as Pasture (column E).

"Woodland as Pasture" (column E) represents land that was used for both cattle rearing and forestry, and was classified as farmland or forestland depending on the point of view. Here, in Table 2, it appears as forestland. In Table 1, it appeared as farmland. The figures for Total Farmland from Column B of Table 1 approximately equal the sum of figures for Columns B and E of Table 2.

The Total Forestland (column C) does not appear to have increased very much, only about 8.5%. However, the extent of "pure" forestland (Column D: Forest Use, Not Grazed) has increased considerably. At the same time, the extent of mixed-use land (Column E: Woodland as Pasture) has declined considerably. The extent of pure forestland increased at the expense of mixed-use land, keeping the amount of total forestland roughly constant.

The change in pure forestland could not have come about in any other way because the amounts of land as "Cropland in Pasture" (Column F) or as "Pasture, Not Crop, Not Forest" (Column G) have not changed enough to cause the increase in pure forestland. Some cropland was converted to pasture but probably not much of that converted cropland was then further converted to forestland – certainly not enough to account for the total decline in cropland or for the increase in forestland.

If one looks at the mixed land (Column E) primarily as forestland, then forestland has increased only quite moderately and has not increased at the expense of farmland. The biggest changes have been the decline in cattle rearing and the intensification of forestry practices. If one looks at the mixed land primarily as farmland, then forestland increased considerably at the expense of farmland and the general picture is as in Table 1.

In fact, both forestry and farming have played considerable roles but changing roles. Overall, farming has declined primarily by changing character and by moving out of extensive cattle rearing. Row crop farming declined considerably but not precipitously. The small amount of pure row crop farming that remains is probably viable, especially in areas with complimentary activities on nearby land, such as fish growing or recreational hunting. The total amount of land under some kind of tree cover (light or heavy) has increased slightly but not at the expense of row crops. The amount of land devoted exclusively to forestry has indeed increased dramatically, primarily by displacing cattle rearing and by the intensification of forestry practices. This pattern of activities in both farming and forestry is likely to hold steady for the future and likely to provide the basis for rural economic activity in Alabama.