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Revised Estimates of Total Crop Acres for the U.S. over 1998-2025

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In a recent *farmdoc daily* article (April 2, 2025), total crop acreage for the U.S. over 1998 through 2025 was estimated as the sum of principal crop, prevented plant, and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) area. We found that total acreage was relatively stable over 1998 through 2014, varying by roughly +/- 5 million acres from an average of 358.1 million acres. Total acreage declined from 356.7 million in 2014 to a low of 337.8 million in 2022, a decline of 18.9 million acres. This is a major contraction in the crop acreage base for the U.S. The CRP has three components—continuous, general, and grassland—and all three were included in the computations in the previous article. This assumed that all acres were cropped for a substantial period of time before enrollment in the CRP. In fact, the assumption does not strictly apply to acres enrolled under the grassland program. The purpose of this article is to update our estimates of total U.S. crop acreage over 1998 through 2025 after accounting for non-crop acres in the grassland CRP program.

Analysis

We begin by reviewing the estimates of total acreage in the *farmdoc daily* article from April 2nd. Complete details on the data and estimation methodology can be found in the article. The estimates of total cropland for the U.S. over 1998 through the projection for 2025 are presented in Figure 1. The total was relatively stable over 1998 through 2014, varying by roughly +/- 5 million acres from the average of 358.1 million. It is especially interesting to observe that total crop acreage was essentially fixed during the ethanol boom years of 2007 through 2012. This makes the decline in total crop acreage after 2014 even more puzzling. Total acreage declined from 356.7 million in 2014 to a low of 337.8 million in 2022, a decline of 18.9 million acres. The projected total crop acreage for 2025 is 337.8 million acres, 3.0 million acres less than the total for 2024 and tied with 2022 for the lowest total crop acreage over 1998 through 2025. This decline in total crop acres for 2025, if ultimately verified, signals that the decline in total acreage in the U.S. that began in 2014 may not have yet run its course.

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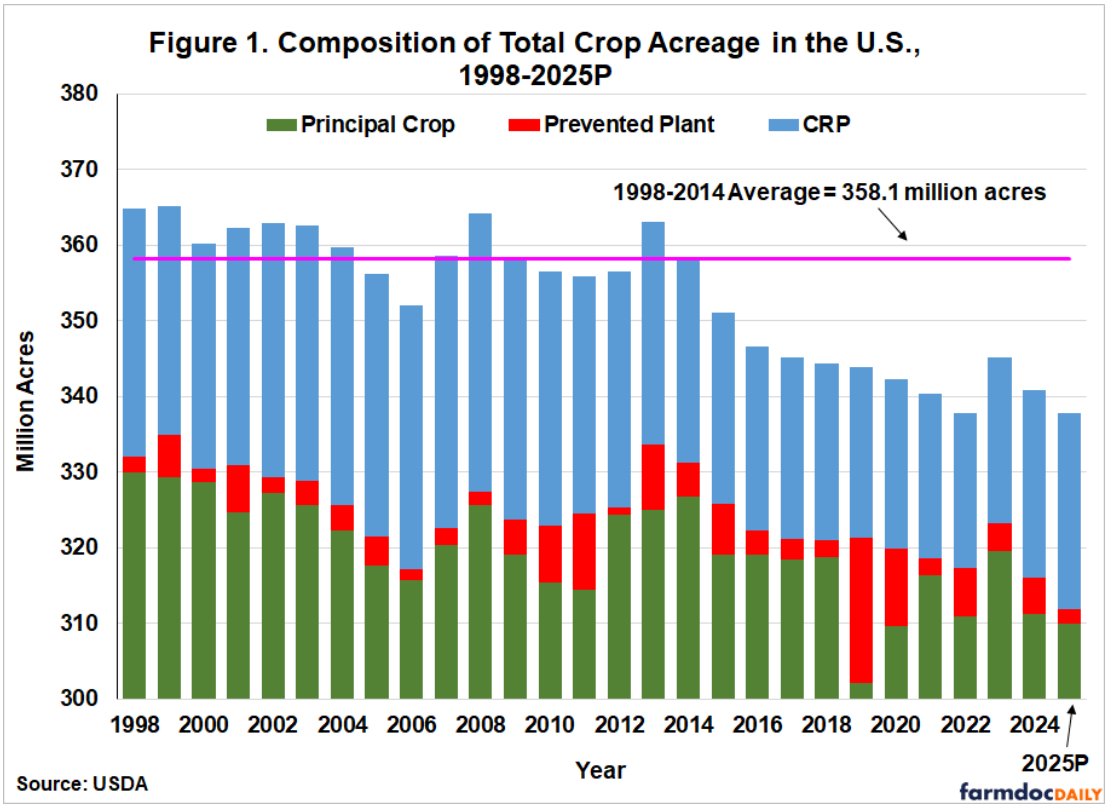
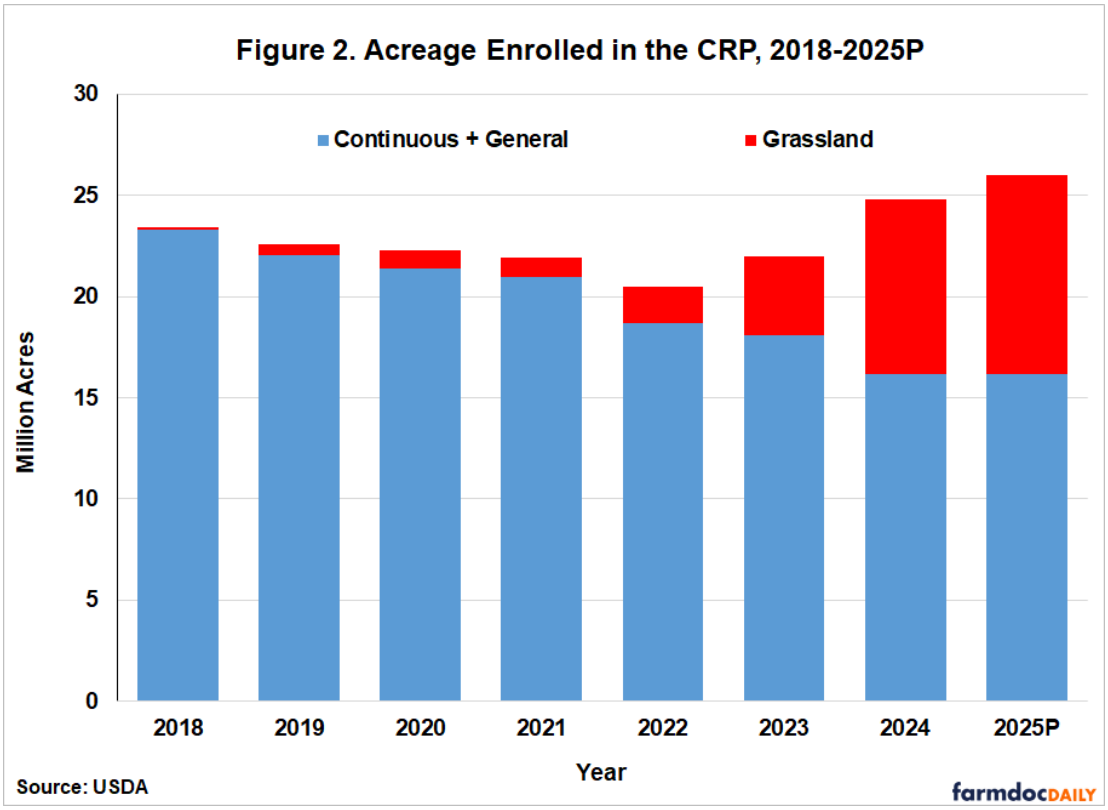


As noted earlier, there are three separate programmatic components to the CRP—continuous, general, and grassland—and all three were included in the CRP data included in Figure 1. A March 2024 USDA fact sheet from the USDA makes it clear that in order to be enrolled in the continuous and general programs that land must have been used in crop production for a sustained period in the recent past:

> "Both continuous CRP and general CRP require cropland, land to be planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity for four of six crop years from 2012 to 2017, and be physically and legally capable of being planted (no planting restrictions due to an easement or other legally binding instrument) in a normal manner to an agricultural commodity." [p.2]

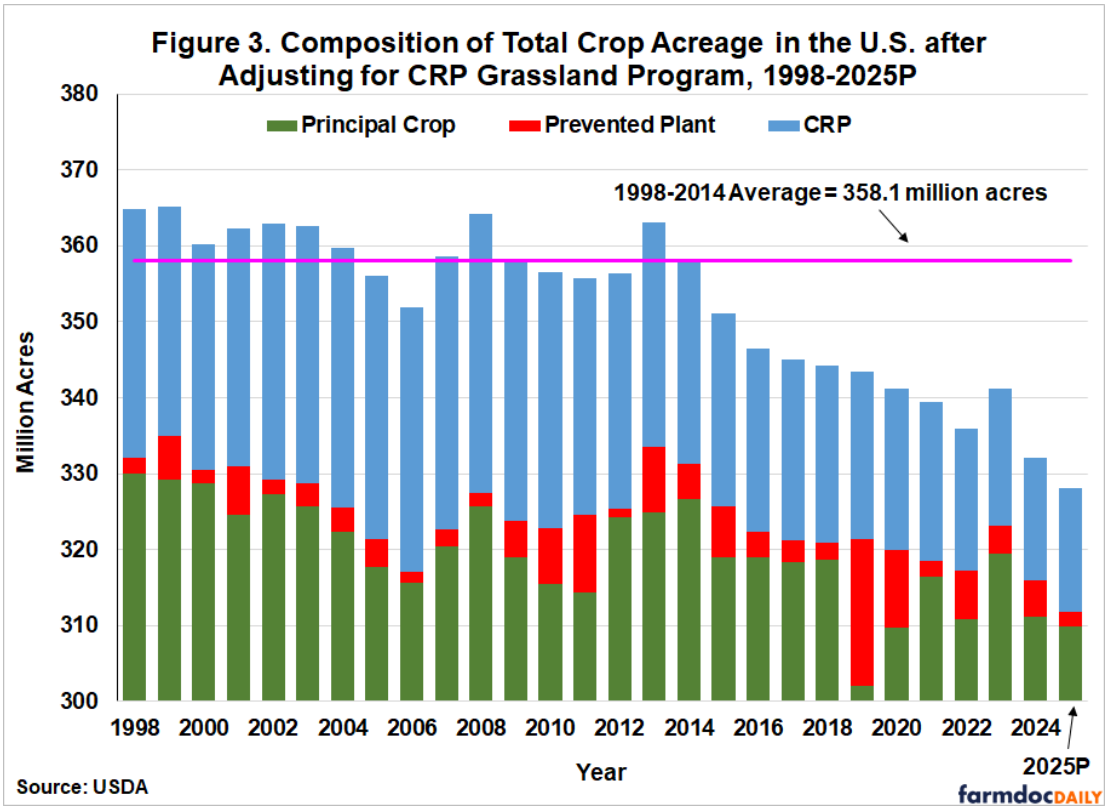
This is the justification for including continuous and general enrollment area in total crop acreage for the U.S. These were acres that were once planted to crops, and therefore, could be planted again in the future.

The grassland component of the CRP is relatively new, having been authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill. According to a January 2021 USDA Fact Sheet, the only eligibility criteria is, "Land currently must be planted to a grass cover." The intention of the program is to protect environmentally sensitive rangeland. As Figure 2 shows, the grassland component of the CRP has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching just under 10 million acres for 2025. By comparison, the total for the continuous and general programs has declined from 23.3 million acres in 2018 to 16.2 million acres in 2025. Consequently, all the growth in the CRP since 2018 has been in the grassland program.



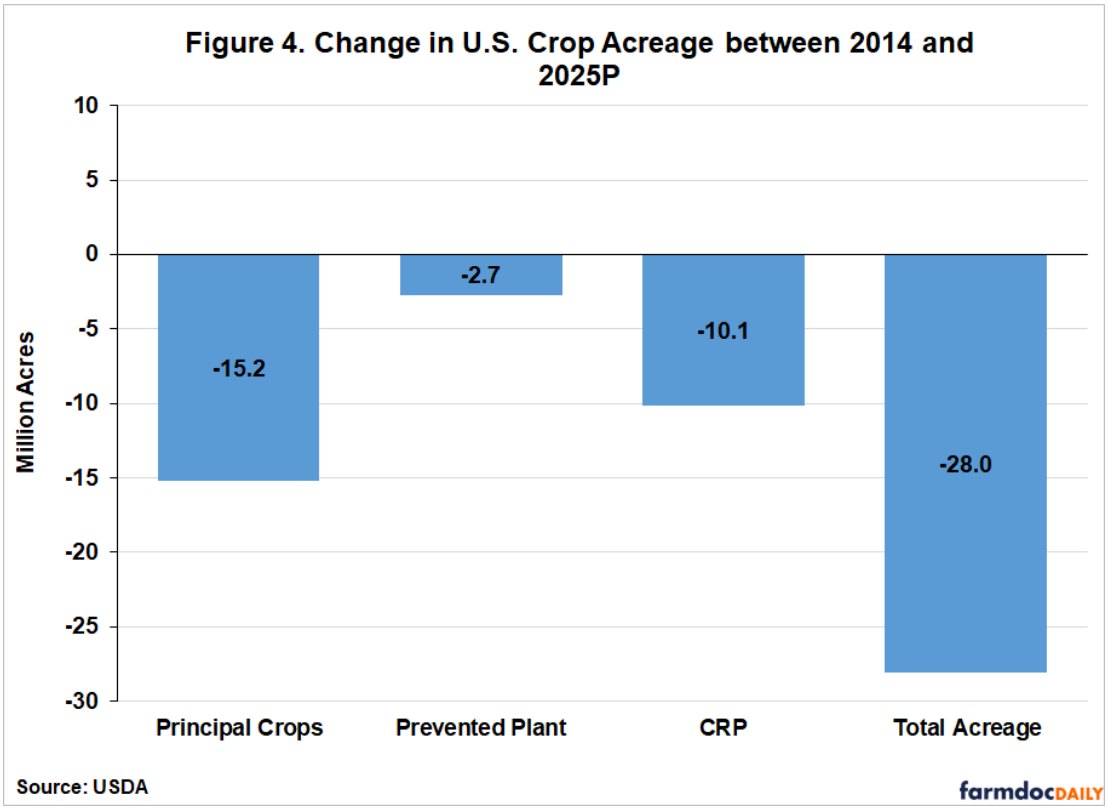
One is tempted to argue that all the acreage in the grassland program should be excluded from computation of the total crop acreage in the U.S. since this program is targeted to environmentally sensitive rangeland. However, a complication arises because CRP acreage under the continuous and general programs must be planted to a cover crop, and when contracts for these acres expire, acres in these two programs are eligible to be enrolled in the grassland program because they meet the cover crop eligibility criteria. Discussions with USDA staff indicate migration into the grassland program in this manner is relatively small, no more than six percent of total grassland program acreage.

Revised estimates of total crop acreage in the U.S. are presented in Figure 3. The estimates through 2017 are the same as in Figure 1 because the grassland program of the CRP did not begin to be reported until 2018. From 2018 through 2025, the size of reported grassland acres is reduced by six percent before subtracting from total CRP acres to account for cropland that may have entered the grassland program through the general and continuous programs. Removing the CRP grassland acres in this manner accelerates the post-2014 loss in total acreage considerably. Total acreage now declines from 356.7 million in 2014 to a low of 328.6 million projected for 2025, a decline of 28.0 million acres, or 7.8 percent. To put the size of this decline in further perspective, total cropland in Illinois in 2024 was 23.7 million acres. Essentially, the U.S. has seen a reduction of total crop acreage in a little more than a decade that is more than the total crop acreage of Illinois.

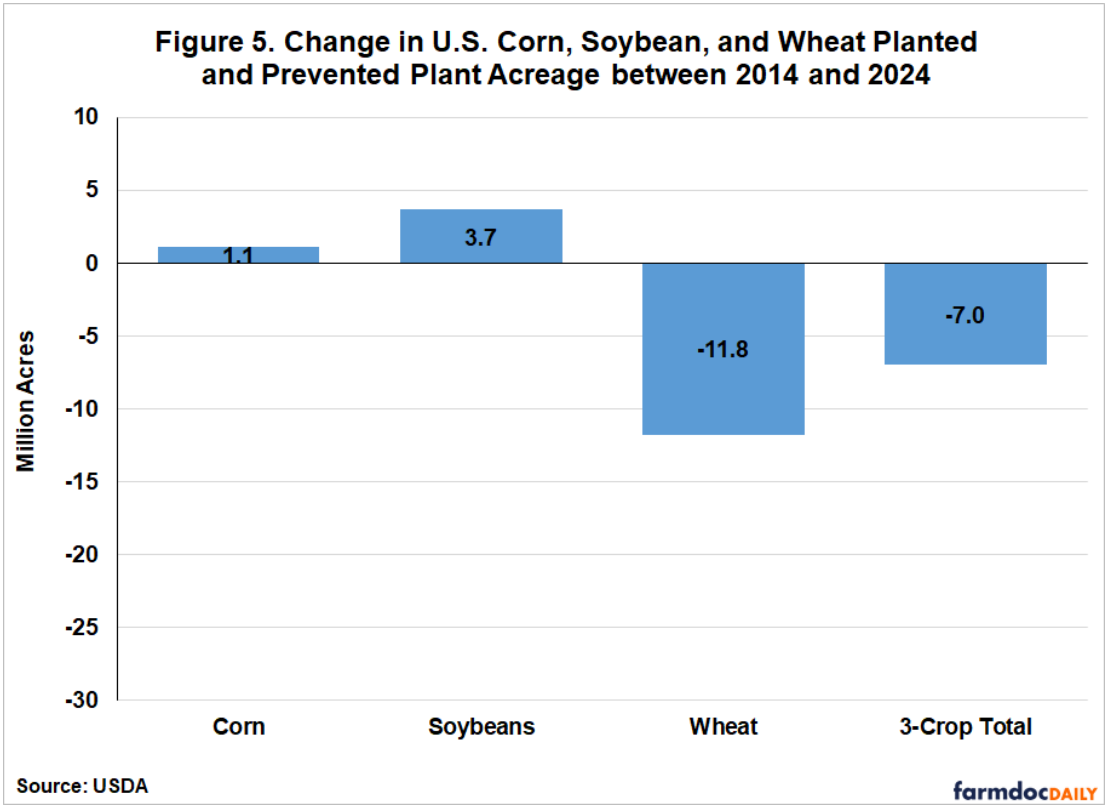


When considering the stunning size of the decline in total U.S. crop acreage in recent years is it important to keep in mind that the data for each component is collected by different agencies within the USDA and each agency uses somewhat different methods and definitions. A single process that imposes an "adding up" constraint is not used by the USDA. Furthermore, each component is subject to sampling and non-sampling errors (e.g., *farmdoc daily*, April 4, 2014; April 9, 2014; June 10, 2021). Nonetheless, it is unlikely that measurement errors have changed substantially over time, which means this is not likely to be helpful in explaining the huge decline in total crop acres since 2014.

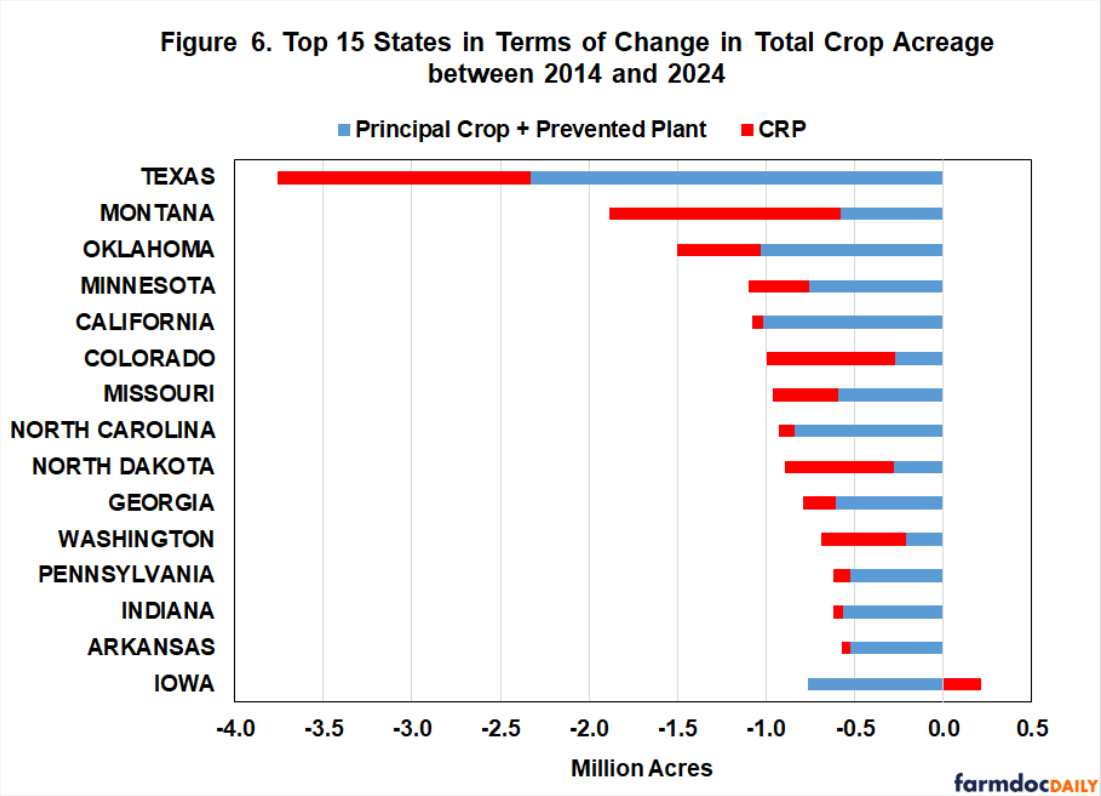
In trying to understand the decline in total crop acres since 2014, it is useful to break the decline into the three different components of total acreage. Figure 4 shows this breakdown of the total decline of 28.0 million acres. Principal crops declined by 15.2 million acres, prevented plant by 2.7 million acres, and CRP by 10.1 million acres. The large decline in both principal crops and CRP acreage is a significant change in the historical behavior of these two series. As documented in our previous article (*farmdoc daily,* April 2, 2025), before 2014 the two series tended to move in opposite directions because the CRP roughly functioned as an acreage "buffer stock," with acreage going into the CRP during low grain price periods and acreage coming out during high grain price periods. It is not obvious why this changed in recent years.



When considering the change in total crop acreage, it is also helpful to examine changes in individual crop acreage for clues. Figure 5 presents the changes in planted and prevented plant acres for corn, soybeans, and wheat between 2014 and 2024. These are the "Big Three" in terms of crop acreage in the U.S. Data for 2025 is not included here because prevented plant acreage is still unknown. Total corn and soybean acreage increased by 4.8 million acres, while (all) wheat acres declined 11.8 million acres. The three-crop total decline was 7.0 million acres, which certainly contributed to the overall decline in crop acreage, yet it is relatively small in comparison to the overall decline of 28.0 million acres since 2014. At the same time, the large decline in wheat acreage suggests that the Great Plains geographic region likely plays an important role in the decline in total acreage, as we have highlighted in previous articles on total U.S. crop acreage (*farmdoc daily*, June 21, 2021; April 2, 2025).



Drilling deeper into the data, Figure 6 shows the top 15 states in terms of changes in total crop acreage between 2014 and 2024. The blue parts of each bar represent the change in principal crop plus prevented plant for each state and the red parts represent changes to CRP. The first thing that jumps off the chart is the size of acreage declines in Texas since 2014. Principal crops plus prevented plant dropped 2.3 million acres and CRP another 1.4 million acres, for a total decline of 3.8 million. This was likely related to the severe droughts Texas has experienced at times during this time period and low wheat returns. Two other Great Plains states—Montana and Oklahoma—have the second and third largest declines in total acreage, confirming the important role that the Great Plains has in understanding the decline in total U.S. crop acreage. However, the list includes only two more Great Plains states, Colorado and North Dakota, with the rest a mix of states from all over the U.S. In addition, there are significant differences in the breakout of changes in principal crop plus prevented plant acreage versus CRP changes. Some states are dominated by changes in principal crops plus prevented plant (California), while others are dominated by changes in CRP (Colorado). In one state, Iowa, the change in CRP acreage was positive, offsetting some of the drop in principal crops plus prevented plant acreage. It also interesting to note that the change in total crop acreage was positive for only two out of the fifty states in the U.S., Alaska and Kansas, and both of these changes were quite small. The consistency of the decline in total acreage across nearly all of the states in the U.S. is striking. Understanding the reasons for the decline is an important research question.



Implications

In this article, we update our earlier estimates of total crop acreage for the U.S. through 2025. The only change is that we no longer account for all acreage in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The grassland program of the CRP was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and his grown rapidly in recent years, nearing 10 million acres. The vast majority of acreage in the grassland CRP is rangeland that has not been cropped for an extended period of time, if ever, and therefore should not be included in computations of total crop acreage. After making this change, total acreage declines from 356.7 million in 2014 to a low of 328.6 million projected for 2025, a decline of 28.0 million acres, or 7.8 percent. To put the size of this decline in perspective, total cropland in Illinois in 2024 was 23.7 million acres. Essentially, in a little more than a decade, the U.S. has seen a reduction of total crop acreage that is more than the total crop acreage of Illinois. Drilling deeper into the data, we find that the size of acreage declines in Texas since 2014 are by far the largest of any state. Two other Great Plains states—Montana and Oklahoma—have the second and third largest declines in total acreage, confirming the important role this region has in understanding the decline in total U.S. crop acreage. But it should also be noted that the decline is by no means only a Great Plains phenomenon. Since 2014, just two states out of the fifty in the U.S. have seen an increase in total crop acreage. Furthermore, large declines in total acreage can be found in states spread out across the entire country. Research is needed to help understand what has been driving this trend because of the potential implications for U.S. crop production.

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