NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES NACo

The County Landscape Project:

Land Use Authority

Vision

Healthy, safe and vibrant counties across America.

Mission

Strengthen America's Counties.

About

The National Association of Counties (NACo) strengthens America's counties, serving nearly 38,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- **Advocate** county priorities in federal policymaking
- **Promote** exemplary county policies and practices
- **Nurture** leadership skills and expand knowledge networks
- **Optimize** county and taxpayer resources and cost savings, and
- **Enrich** the public understanding of county government.

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The County Landscape Project

Counties are vital to the foundation of our communities, helping shape the places where we live, work and thrive. From maintaining critical infrastructure and delivering essential public services to fostering economic growth and ensuring public safety, county governments play a pivotal role in the daily lives of Americans. Notwithstanding our significance, the complexity and diversity of county governments often go unnoticed. The County Landscape Project brings the nuts and bolts of county governance to the forefront, providing a clear and comprehensive guide to how counties function, govern and serve our residents.

As NACo continues its commitment to strengthen America's counties, we recognize the need for a unified, accessible and authoritative resource that provides a comprehensive guide to our nation's county government system. By developing key insights, data and best practices under a single, cohesive project, we aim to enhance the way county officials, policymakers, federal and philanthropic partners and the public engage with and utilize these valuable resources. **Whether examining the organizational structures, financial frameworks, essential services or intergovernmental roles of counties,** the project serves as a critical reference for understanding county government at its core.

This initiative reflects NACo's dedication to providing clarity in county governance, empowering leaders with actionable insights and fostering collaboration across all levels of government. Whether you are an elected official shaping policy, a researcher exploring county data or a resident seeking to understand the impact of local government, these resources serve as a guide to the essential functions of counties nationwide.

As we move forward, we invite you to explore, engage and utilize the resources from the project in your work. Counties are the backbone of our nation's governance, and together, we can ensure that our impact is recognized, strengthened and sustained for generations to come.

Matthew D. Chase, Chief Executive Officer

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Introduction and Key Takeaways

A developer seeks to build new roads and a housing subdivision in a currently empty field. A solar company is planning a new generation facility in an agricultural area. An industrial facility seeks to minimize impacts on a neighboring sensitive environmental area. In all of these cases, how land is used carries profound implications for the future of the surrounding community. In every jurisdiction, policymakers must determine how to guide development while balancing economic growth, quality of life, affordability and other concerns.

Land use policy provides the regulatory structure for determining what and where residents or developers can build. These regulations help guide development and conservation within a county and are critical to a variety of service areas, including housing, economic development, energy, environmental protection and disaster mitigation. Certain land uses are associated with particular kinds of economic activity, whether agricultural, residential commercial, industrial or mixed-use, and can have significant implications for local tax revenues, budgets and government services. Thus, it is important for land use decisions to be made at the local level by leaders who understand the peculiarities of the land within their boundaries.

This report explores the role of counties in shaping land use policy in different states and regions across the nation. The report reviews the history of land use policy before defining current structures and authority levels, with an eye on the divide between incorporated, unincorporated and public lands, plus the role of states in granting or restricting local flexibility. Next, this report delves into different types of actual land use along with the specific issues that tend to shape land use policy in different areas. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of public lands, especially federal, and the layer of complexity these lands add to understanding land use authority in the U.S.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. **Counties in 37 states have or share authority over private, unincorporated land.**
   - This unincorporated land over which counties have or share authority comprises about 41 percent of all land across the United States.

2. **Counties play a variety of roles in the land use and planning process,** from directly regulating unincorporated land via zoning codes and ordinances, to engaging in longer-term planning with other jurisdictions and regional partners.
   - Even when they do not directly exercise authority over land use, counties play vital advocacy and coordinating roles with municipal, state and federal policymakers.

3. **Land uses vary considerably by region,** impacting how counties make planning, zoning and other land use decisions.
   - Roughly 37 percent of U.S land is made up of grassland, shrubland or open space, 24 percent is forested, 24 percent is used for farming and 7 percent is urban. Each type of land has its own unique set of challenges and priorities.

4. **Public lands counties face a different set of challenges** since development is typically restricted to the boundaries of private land.
   - The federal government manages nearly half of all land in the contiguous West and nearly two-thirds or more in states like Nevada and Utah. In these areas, counties coordinate closely with state and federal agencies and use policy tools to express priorities.

5. **Land use policies are critical to a variety of service areas,** including housing, economic development, energy, environmental protection and disaster mitigation.
   - Data center construction is increasingly driving land use conversations across urban and rural counties alike. Local leaders are weighing the economic benefits against energy capabilities and environmental impacts.
   - Housing affordability, renewable energy, agricultural land preservation and even siting of essential public facilities like jails, fire stations and public works departments often generate considerable public engagement.

PART 1:

County Zoning and Land Use Authority

A Brief History of Land Use Regulation

Humans have managed land use for centuries, primarily through piecemeal, informal methods. However, the rise of heavy industry within cities prompted officials to find ways to formally separate residential areas from noxious land uses such as factories and ports. The first comprehensive zoning ordinance in the U.S. was adopted by New York City in 1916,[1] and in 1922 the U.S. Department of Commerce circulated the first federal guidance to standardize state and local zoning regulations.[2] States also passed legislation to enable local zoning throughout the 1920s. By the end of 1930, over 1,000 U.S. municipalities had implemented zoning laws and every state had granted zoning authority to some or all of its local governments.[3]

Early zoning ordinances were relatively simple compared to the detailed regulation found in many modern municipal codes. However, as cities grew larger and more complex, zoning codes grew longer. Policymakers sought to exert greater control over development and the built environment by adding rules governing the density and aesthetics of development, such as height limits, minimum lot sizes.[4]

Beyond urban centers and suburban tracts, rural areas also enacted zoning laws focused on issues like soil conservation, flood control and maintaining the rural character of small communities.[5] Wisconsin gave counties zoning authority over unincorporated areas in 1923 to help prevent the over-harvesting of forests, and other states followed suit soon after with similar legislation to encourage rural zoning laws.[6] Oneida County, Wis., adopted the first comprehensive rural zoning ordinance.[7] Common land use regulations in rural areas include setting minimum lot sizes to preserve local landscapes, imposing site-design regulations to protect sensitive ecosystems and creating new conservation overlay districts to add additional standards to development.[8]

More recently, land use has become a vehicle for political debates over development in general. **In many jurisdictions, officials must balance the tension between the need for economic growth and infrastructure on one hand, and the need for community preservation and environmental protection on the other.** Constructing enough housing units to meet population demand is of particular concern in many urban, suburban and exurban areas, particularly those with shortages of low- to middle-income housing, where certain kinds of land use regulation can inhibit housing construction. Other communities, particularly those that have hosted heavy industry in the past, are concerned with managing lingering pollution and environmental restoration. Each jurisdiction faces unique challenges; there is no single overarching trend in land use policy. Some localities have made their zoning rules more restrictive in recent decades while others have moved towards less restrictive zoning.[9]

Where Can Counties Zone? County Authority Over Unincorporated Areas

Zoning is the primary policy tool through which counties regulate land use. Many counties adopt a zoning or land use code into the code of ordinances to set broad rules regarding commercial, residential, agricultural and other types of development. Some counties even have a specialized planning commission to adjudicate ministerial county actions regarding land use, such as reviewing and approving permit applications. Zoning codes vary considerably with each county's needs; many counties have extensive codes regulating housing development, industrial use, agriculture and other regional priorities.

Counties generally regulate land that is both private and unincorporated. The level of zoning authority counties can wield varies by state and region. In 37 states, counties have authority over private, unincorporated land, or share that authority with municipal governments. Counties tend to have the most authority over land use in the West and in much of the South. In many Midwest states, counties share land use authority with townships. And in the Northeast, where township and municipal forms of government predominate, counties tend to have less direct authority over land use regulation but still play an important role as a locus for regional coordination. The federal government also holds over 70 million acres of public land for tribal governments, mostly located in the West and upper Midwest regions.[10] County governments have no jurisdiction over tribal lands within their boundaries.

Counties' zoning authority also depends on the amount of private, unincorporated land within their borders; those with more incorporated and/or public lands will have relatively less opportunity to directly regulate land use and development. Municipalities generally zone their own incorporated land, while most public land is owned and managed by the federal government or by states, and some by tribal governments. In the Northeast and Midwest, where townships are prevalent in unincorporated areas, counties and townships often share zoning authority. For instance, the Ohio Revised Code grants county commissioners broad powers to regulate land in unincorporated areas, but some counties may delegate zoning authority to townships. In the South and West, counties generally have broad authority over unincorporated areas, although they may be limited by statewide restrictions.

Practically speaking, counties with high proportions of private, unincorporated land under county jurisdiction, such as the South (47 percent) and the Midwest (70 percent), will generally have more zoning authority than counties with large amounts of incorporated or public land. One notable exception is Oklahoma, where tribal lands form a significant portion of the state's land area. Texas and Alabama are also exceptions, since these states grant planning and zoning authority only

JURISDICTION AND LAND OWNERSHIP

- **Incorporated Area:** An area with an autonomous, municipal-level government with its own elected officials. Municipalities tend to control land use in incorporated areas.
- **Unincorporated Area:** An area without a municipal-level government. Counties or townships tend to control land use in unincorporated areas, with some notable exceptions in certain states.
- **Private Land:** Owned by private entities, but subject to zoning and other land use regulations.
- **Public Land:** Owned and managed by federal, state, local or tribal governments and agencies.

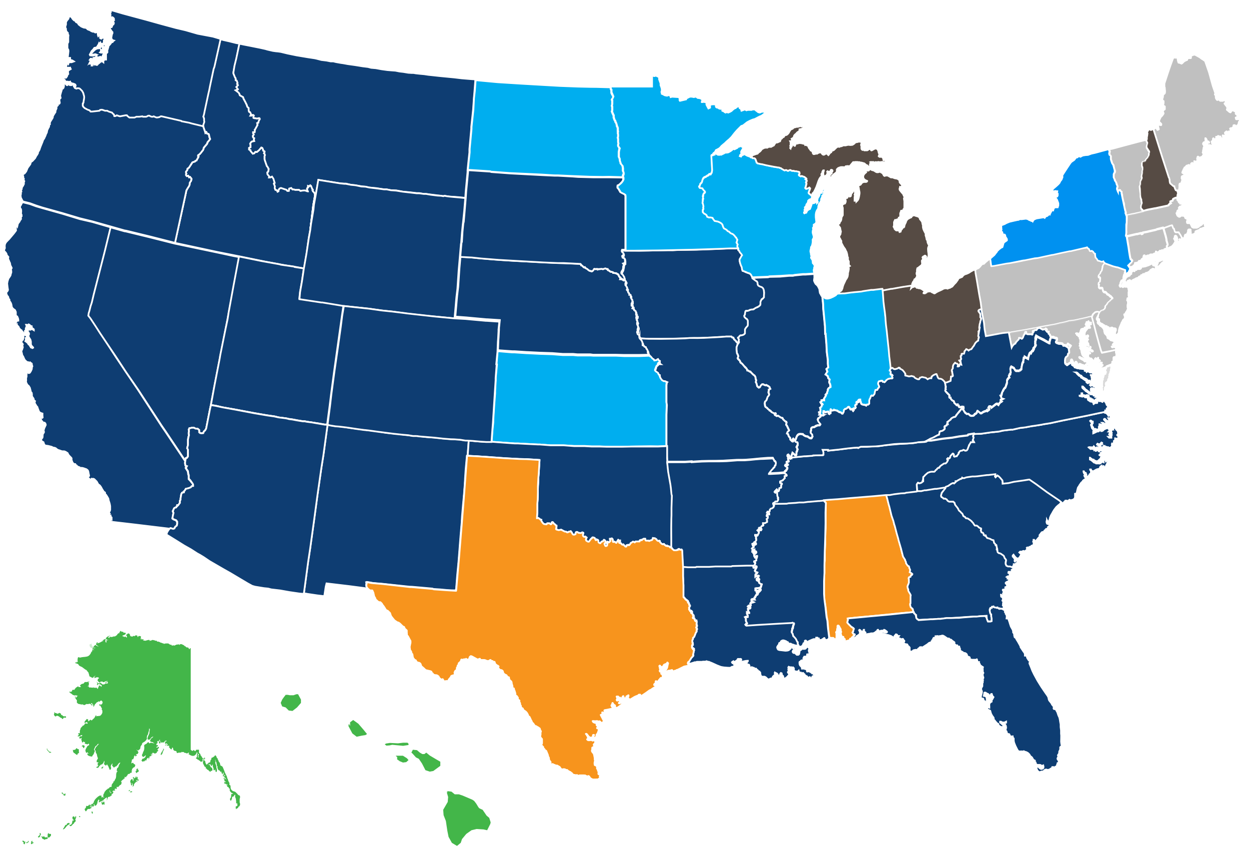
to certain counties. Most Northeastern states have township or borough-based local governments, where any land which is not incorporated falls under township jurisdiction and counties have traditionally held less authority relative to other regions.

Although about 80 percent of land in the Northeast is unincorporated, only 0.3 percent falls under any county jurisdiction. Coos County, N.H., is the only county in the region with direct zoning authority; nearly all other unincorporated land falls under township authority, aside from a large portion (42 percent) of Maine which is unorganized and remains under state jurisdiction.

The West contains the bulk of the nation's federal public lands, which form a substantial proportion of these states' lands overall. In Alaska, Idaho, Nevada and Utah, the federal government manages at least 60 percent of total land area, leaving counties with authority over a much smaller portion of land. A large portion of land

COUNTIES IN 37 STATES HAVE OR SHARE AUTHORITY OVER PRIVATE, UNINCORPORATED LAND

County Zoning Authority in the U.S.

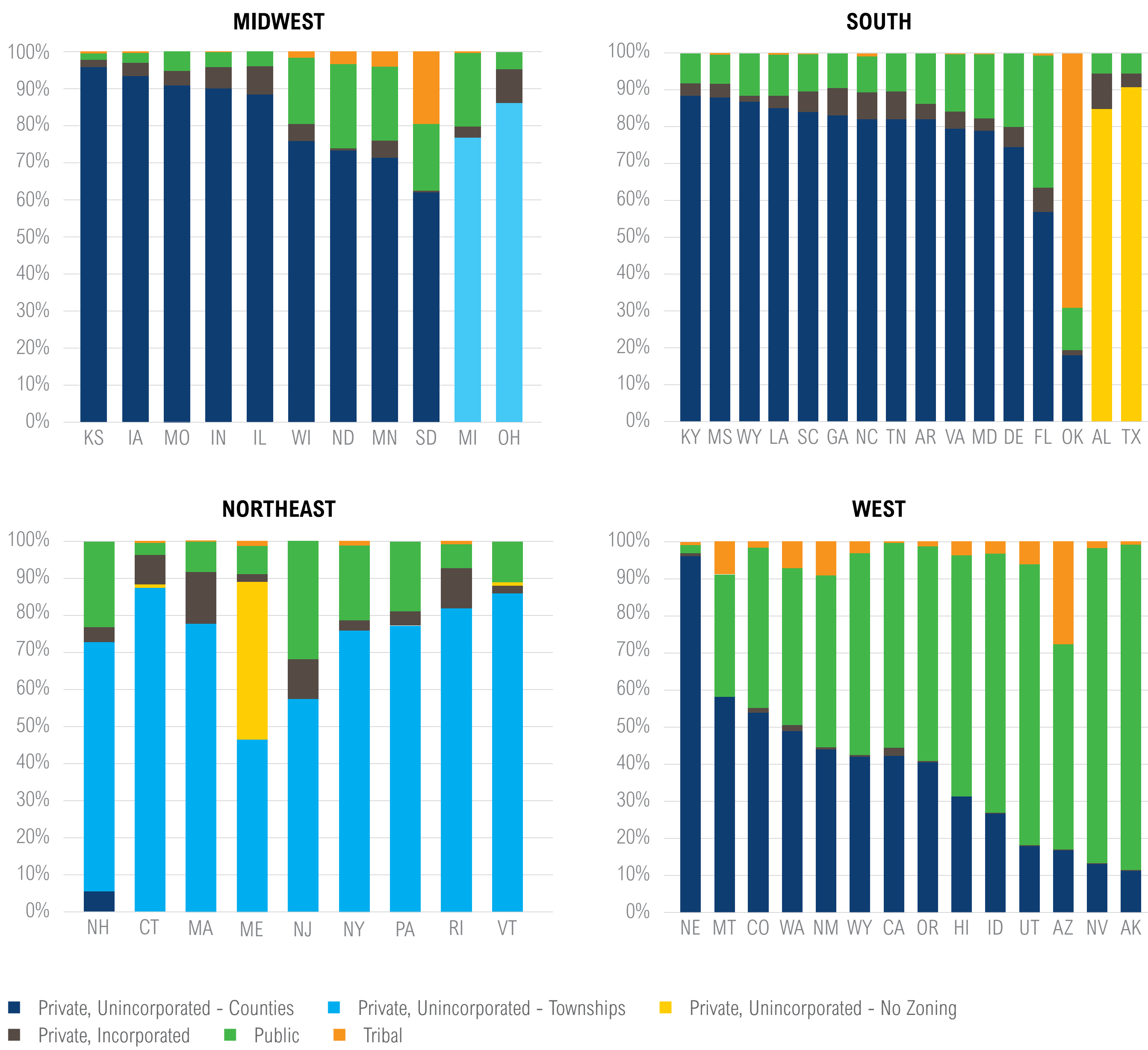


- Counties or boroughs zone all land, unless they cede power to municipalities.
- Counties zone unincorporated land. Municipalities zone their own land.
- Mostly counties and some townships zone unincorporated land. Municipalities zone their own land.
- Mostly townships and some counties zone unincorporated land. Municipalities zone their own land.
- Townships zone all unincorporated land. Municipalities zone their own land.
- Zoning authority for counties requires state approval. Municipalities zone their own land.

Source: *Adapted from Lydia Lo, "Who Zones? Mapping Land-Use Authority across the U.S.," Urban Institute (Dec. 2019). Updated by NACo Research, 2026.*

COUNTIES IN THE MIDWEST AND SOUTH HAVE THE MOST PRIVATE, UNINCORPORATED LAND UNDER COUNTY JURISDICTION

Breakdown of Unincorporated, Incorporated, Public and Tribal Land, by State



Sources: *NACo analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Gazetteer Files (Counties; Places; County Subdivisions); U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1: U.S. Geological Survey data release.*

Notes: *(1) Townships exist in 20 states and are classified by Census as "minor civil divisions", not as incorporated places. In this analysis, townships are separated out only in states where they hold zoning authority; otherwise, they are kept under the county unincorporated area category because counties hold zoning authority over them. A few of these states contain some townships with separate zoning authority, but since the majority of townships in these states are under county authority, we did not separate out these few townships. (2) A few states, notably Alabama, Maine and Texas all contain large areas of unincorporated land with no local zoning. These states may grant specific counties zoning authority with an explicit state legislative action. (3) Hawaii has no incorporated places. (4) City-county consolidations are represented under the "private, incorporated areas" category. (5) The only county with zoning authority in New Hampshire is Coos County. (6) These totals are approximates derived from tabulated land area calculations rather than geometric overlays. As a result, there may be minor discrepancies in the totals.*

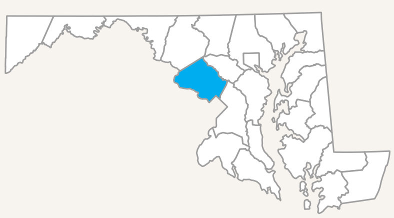
in Alaska is located in unorganized boroughs, where there is no borough-level government to levy taxes or provide county-equivalent services. As a result, the responsibilities of local government are reduced and divided between incorporated municipalities and the State of Alaska.

Types of County Land Use Regulations

The authority that counties hold over land use is most often expressed as a county zoning code, which sets rules for what can be built and where. Counties also often engage in longer-term regional planning with states and municipalities to meet shared goals regarding housing development, conservation, environmental protection and other important issues. Many counties have their own planning department, board or commission to handle issues surrounding land use and development. This board sets planning priorities, helps develop a general plan for long-term guidance and often negotiates terms with individual developers for conditional use permits. Even when we cannot zone land directly, counties can leverage relationships with federal, state and local officials to advocate for shared priorities. Counties can also help coordinate actions between municipalities to meet common goals.

There are four primary mechanisms through which counties may directly set land use regulations:

1. **Broad zoning regulations:** Dividing unincorporated areas into residential, commercial, agricultural or natural/protected areas (see "In Practice: Monroe County, N.Y." on page 15).



In Practice: Revamping Zoning in Montgomery County, Md.

Over 900,000 residents live in Montgomery County's unincorporated areas, giving the county a central role in shaping land use and development compared to many other counties. In response to rising housing costs and a shortage of homes affordable to middle income workers, the **More Housing N.O.W. (New Options for Workers) package** was introduced in 2025.

Rather than a single zoning change, the package is a set of coordinated legislative and budget actions aimed at increasing housing supply in targeted locations and creating new paths to homeownership. Key components include zoning changes to allow more housing types along certain road segments, including duplexes, townhomes, and small apartment buildings, coupled with **workforce housing requirements**. Other components include streamlined approvals and financial incentives for converting vacant or underutilized office buildings to residential use, as well as targeted investments to support housing production and access, such as a new workforce housing fund and expanded assistance for first-time homebuyers.

Some elements of the package have been adopted, most notably the zoning changes that permit more diverse housing types along designated road segments to expand housing choices near jobs and transit. Supporters argue these measures will help address the county's housing shortage and improve affordability, while opponents have raised concerns about potential impacts on traffic, infrastructure and neighborhood character.

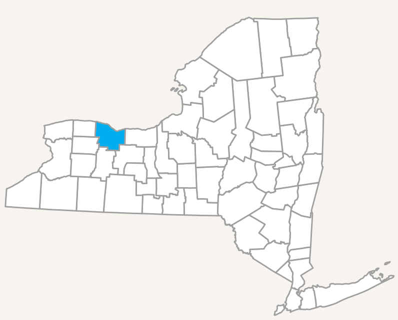
2. **Specific zoning regulations:** Setting parameters for development at specific sites. This can include minimum lot sizes, parking requirements, height and setback restrictions (see "In Practice: Montgomery County, Md." on page 14).

3. **Subdivision regulations:** Unlike zoning, subdivision regulations do not explicitly divide land into categorical uses such as residential or commercial. Rather, they attach rules to the process of subdividing large tracts of land into smaller, developable parcels. These types of regulations are common in rural areas with much undeveloped land (see "In Practice: Cullman County, Ala." below).

4. **Permitting and processing:** Establishing a review and permitting process to vet development. This generally includes public input sessions, review and approval by a county planning commission, and an appeals process. Counties must balance the need for public input and due diligence with the need for a timely and effective approval process (see "In Practice: Los Angeles County, Calif." below).

In Practice: Streamlining Permitting in Los Angeles County, Calif.

After wildfires destroyed large swaths of homes and businesses in unincorporated parts of Los Angeles County in January 2025, officials set out to revamp the county's permit approval process to facilitate faster rebuilding. Typically, proposed developments would need to go through an extensive permitting review process, which could take months or even years to complete. However, officials are seeking to streamline approvals for wildfire-affected areas through the use of an "eCheck" artificial intelligence tool designed to automatically review building plans for code compliance. This pilot program aims to help affected residents – many of whom are unfamiliar with the construction permitting process – rebuild their homes faster and cheaper than through traditional means. County officials are optimistic that the technology, made available through a partnership with the AI company Archistar, will become more refined by training on permitting data from the pilot program and can be more widely launched in the coming years.



In Practice: Coordinating Action in Monroe County, N.Y.

Monroe County is home to the city of Rochester and its environs on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. Like most counties in New York, it does not directly zone land. However, its planning division takes an active role in providing technical assistance to other jurisdictions, developing GIS mapping tools to analyze current land use patterns and setting long-term priorities through its Capital Improvement Program. The county's Plan Forward initiative, which began in 2021, is engaging local stakeholders and the public to develop a comprehensive, countywide land use plan. County officials hope the completed plan will help the Rochester area tackle issues such as sustainability, social equity, water quality and energy supply more effectively.

Alongside these direct land management tools, counties may indirectly impact development and manage land through building codes. These codes can impact the feasibility of development in certain areas, and the locations where development may take place. For example, environmental health requirements, including septic system standards, can alter where developers may build homes, as well as the density of these homes. Counties can also steer development away from disaster-prone areas using such requirements. Although these requirements are not direct land use regulations, they often influence how land can be developed in practice.

In Practice: Regulating Subdivisions in Cullman County, Ala.

Counties need not have an explicit zoning code to guide development. Cullman County, Ala., a rural county located between Birmingham and Huntsville, instead issues **subdivision regulations**. These regulations apply to developers seeking to divide large tracts of land into several smaller ones. For instance, a homebuilder may seek to divide a large field into half-acre lots for single-family homes. Subdivision regulations can set standards for development aspects such as new roads, utilities and drainage, functioning similarly to a zoning code. The Cullman County Commission intends for these regulations to help protect community character and public health, as well as guide future growth in the county in a sustainable manner.

A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO LAND USE AND HOUSING

NACo's 2023 Housing Task Force identified four solution areas counties may implement to develop a proactive, cohesive approach to land use management.[11] The full guidance is available at **"Advancing Local Housing Affordability: NACo Housing Task Force Final Report."**

1. **Evaluate Current Zoning Plans and Practices**
   Counties should thoroughly review current regulations on land use and development for alignment with stated development and conservation goals. A task force or commission can examine particular statutes and make recommendations for updates, clarifications and improvements, including changes to permitting and approval processes if necessary.

2. **Identify Potential Infrastructure Barriers to New Development**
   New development requires infrastructure such as power, water, roads and sewer lines. Counties should identify how potential changes in land use – whether through new housing, commercial areas or energy facilities – may affect infrastructure needs, and whether the lack of infrastructure is a potential barrier to meeting local development needs.

3. **Understand the Inventory of Land in the County**
   A thorough inventory of land is a vital resource that allows policymakers to have a big-picture view of how land is currently used. Many counties maintain a GIS database of parcels with important information such as zoning designation and other regulations, which policymakers and researchers can consult when assessing development plans and goals.

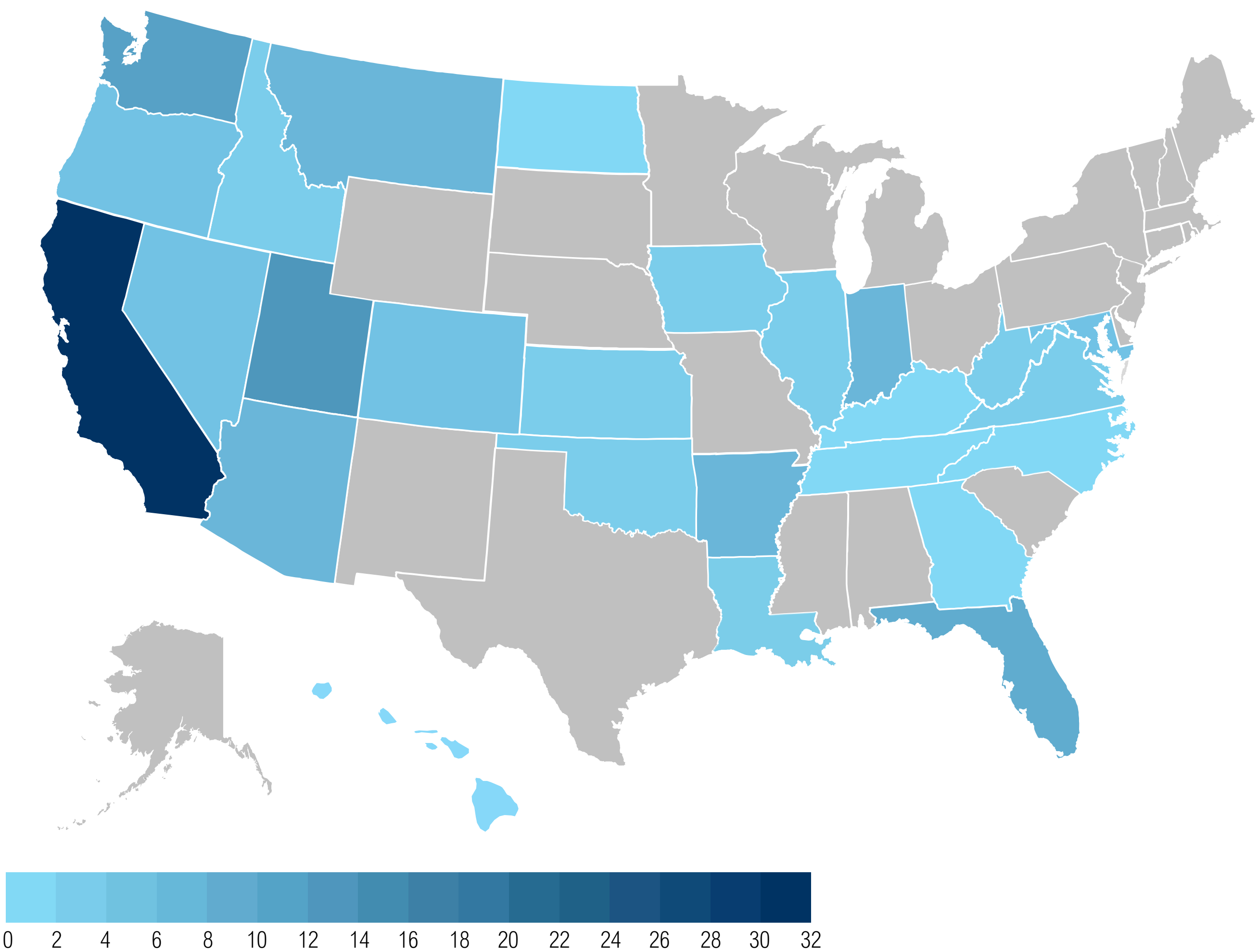
4. **Develop a Long-Term Housing and Land Use Plan**
   Although the development process, including permitting and zoning changes, typically happens on a case-by-case basis, a long-term land use plan can set broader goals regarding sustainability, housing and other important policy areas. By engaging local stakeholders and soliciting inputs from the affected communities, the planning process serves as a forum to express community needs and concerns around development, as well as a focal point for local municipalities to coordinate their own land use management practices.

How Do States Impact Local Land Use Authority?

As with many other areas of county governance, authority over land use is subject to additional requirements, restrictions or exemptions set by the state. Some states defer control to localities and set minimal restrictions on counties' ability to zone. However, there has been a growing legislative movement in many state capitals to preempt local land use authority, often in an attempt to meet regional goals for housing development and energy infrastructure. State officials across the political spectrum have passed laws in recent years to push for more housing construction, particularly in urban areas where housing affordability is a major concern, changing the extent to which local governments can control land use and housing and consequently reducing the decision-making power of residents.[12]

27 STATES PASSED LAND USE PREEMPTION LAWS IN 2025

Number of Land Use Preemption Bills Passed in 2025, by State



Source: *NACo Research, 2026.*

For instance, Colorado passed a package of six legislative bills in 2024 targeted at the state's urban areas. Besides regional planning efforts, the package included measures to require localities to allow denser construction near bus and train stops, eliminate required parking minimums and adopt a Housing Needs Assessment by the end of 2026. Florida's Live Local Act, passed in 2023, requires localities to approve affordable housing developments that meet certain requirements. It also requires local governments to assess publicly owned land that could be suitable for affordable housing development. The largely rural state of Montana, which has struggled with rapidly increasing home prices, passed its own suite of **zoning reforms** in 2023 to legalize duplexes on all residential land, limit public hearings on development and require most local governments to establish a planning commission.

The application of Dillon's Rule is an important part of the discussion around the relationship between counties and land use. Dillon's Rule establishes the more restrictive doctrine of general county authority, under which counties can only exercise authority that the state explicitly grants them. However, whether Dillon's Rule is a meaningful barrier to greater local control over development is unclear – it depends on the approach of each individual state. A 2003 report from the Brookings Institution found that many Dillon's Rule states had delegated land use authority to counties, concluding that "a state's adherence to Dillon's Rule in no way precludes strong action to deal with growth-related challenges."[13] The report points to Dillon's Rule states such as Maryland and Virginia, which are home to large, urban counties that consist largely of unincorporated land, such as Arlington County in Virginia and Montgomery County in Maryland. Their respective states grant these counties extensive authority to govern development within their borders. When examining bills with clauses that preempt county land use authority in 2025, NACo found that bills were introduced at essentially the same rate in Dillon's Rule and Home Rule states (267 and 244, respectively), but were slightly more likely to pass into law in Home Rule states.

States can exercise preemption through several channels. Among the most common include certain state-level requirements for building codes, review processes and permits. At least 60bills were introduced in 2025 that would change local requirements for approving development. Other common areas of focus for states include affordable housing and energy or environmental regulations, which have appeared in 42 and 71 bills each year, respectively, according to NACo's analysis of state legislation.[14]

State preemption of county authority removes land use decisions from the community and from local elected leaders. Rather than preempt local authority through state legislation, states can play a supportive role by proactively helping counties to comply with statewide initiatives through technical assistance and model zoning codes. This assistance can help unify county policies across a state while also allowing for local differences.

Read NACo's full analysis of 2025 land use preemption bills

PART 2:

Land Uses and Policy Concerns

Types of Land Use

Just as land use authority varies widely across states and regions, so does the use of the land itself. The USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) tracks types of land use, which divides land into distinct categories, listed below as defined by ERS:[15]

- **Forests:** All commercial-use forest land. Excludes protected uses such as national parks.
- **Croplands:** Dedicated to farming and raising crops, including idle pastures.
- **Grasslands and Shrublands:** Open spaces, including public and private grazing lands.
- **Urban areas:** Areas with dense populations.[16]
- **Other:** "Miscellaneous other uses such as land in cemeteries, golf courses, mining areas, quarry sites, marshes, swamps, sand dunes, bare rocks, deserts, tundra, and other unclassified land, as well as some—but not all—industrial, commercial, and residential sites in rural areas. Land in this category is equal to the remaining land in each State after all other land-use categories have been reconciled."[17]

Each state has a unique mix of these land classifications. Land use patterns vary regionally: substantial portions of land in Midwestern states are dedicated to cropland – up to 80 percent in Iowa – while the Northeast has greater proportions of forests and urban land. Over a third of land in New Jersey is urbanized, the highest rate in the nation. Many Southern states are primarily composed of crops and forests, while grasslands, shrublands and open spaces are more common in the West. Desert states such as Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico contain particularly high proportions of grass and shrublands.

The issues counties in different states and regions face depend not only on jurisdictional authority, but also on the type of land – the physical, practical reality of the land and how it is currently being used. Although privately owned croplands, forest lands, grassland and shrublands may be seen as land that could be used

AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION AND FARMLAND PROTECTION

County governments have a variety of tools to manage urban growth and preserve farmland in unincorporated areas:

- **Agricultural conservation easements** are voluntary deed restrictions that owners place on their land to keep it available for farming. Typically, these easements limit any use of the land that is incompatible with agriculture. Counties may set up easement purchase programs to pay property owners to keep their land available for agriculture.
- **Agricultural protection zoning** ordinances designate certain areas to be primarily used for farming and discourage other land uses. These ordinances may restrict large areas of land from nonfarm development.
- **Cluster zoning** ordinances require houses to be grouped together to protect open spaces, often on land that is not productive for agriculture.
- **Mitigation ordinances** require developers who develop farmland to protect an equivalent amount in other areas, often by purchasing easements.
- **Urban growth boundaries** can be set by counties in planning documents to define which areas are intended for future growth versus for rural preservation.

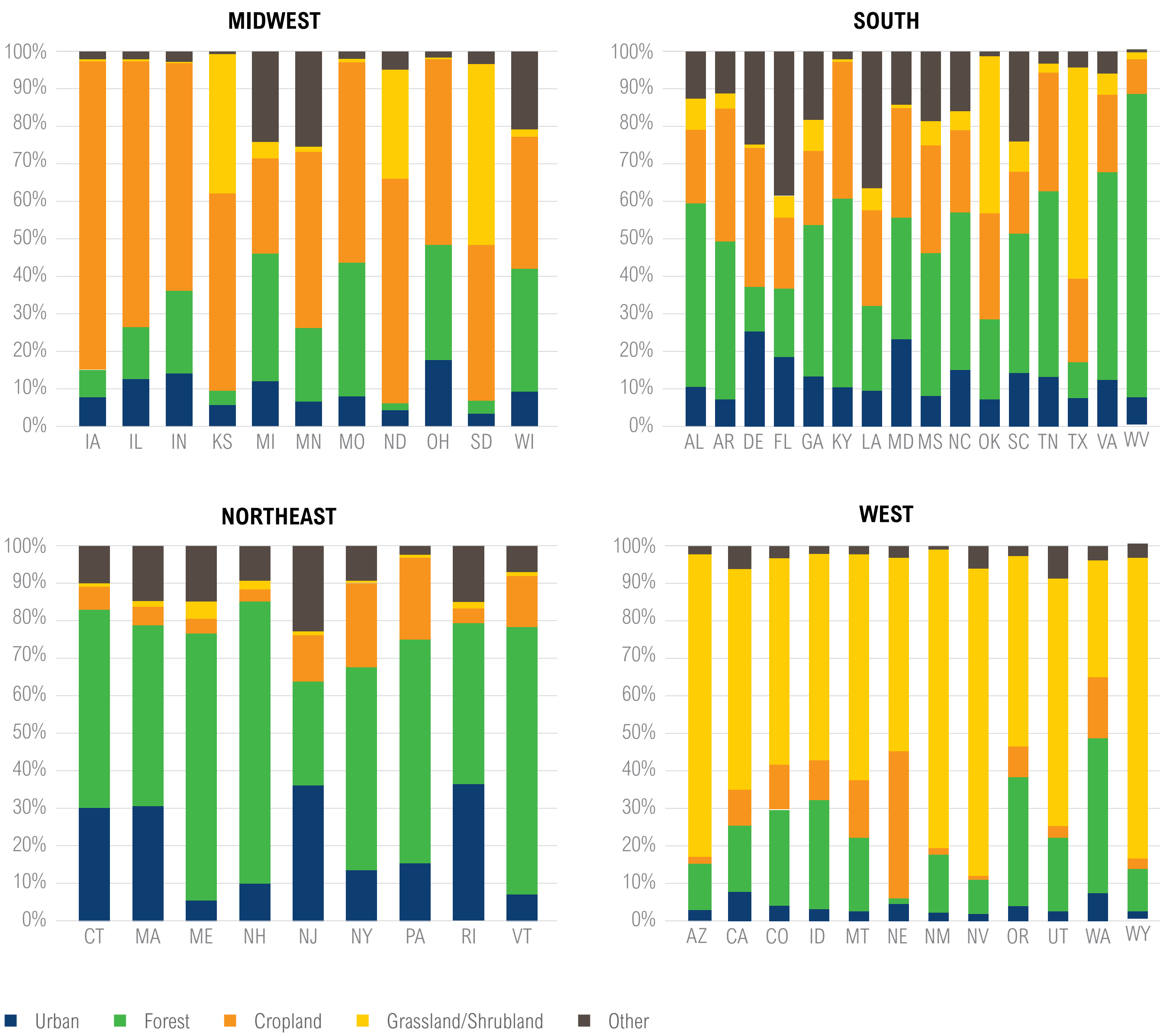
Source: *American Farmland Trust, "Protect Farm and Ranch Land," available at https://farmlandinfo.org/ag-toolbox/protect-farm-and-ranch-land/ (accessed May 2026).*

for developing houses and businesses, these lands may have been a crucial part of a family's livelihood going back multiple generations or may be resource constrained such that development would risk water availability or other utilities for the rest of the community.

As urban areas expand and populations grow, local planning is a key part of development, since developed land rarely converts back to open land. For development to occur, residents who own this land must be willing to change how they use or invest in their land,

CURRENT LAND USE IMPACTS FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Breakdown of Land Cover, by State



Source: *NACo Analysis of U.S. Geological Survey, Annual NLCD Collection 1 Version 1, 2024 Land Cover (CONUS).*

Note: *Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this analysis because land cover data for these two states is not available for 2024 from USGS.*

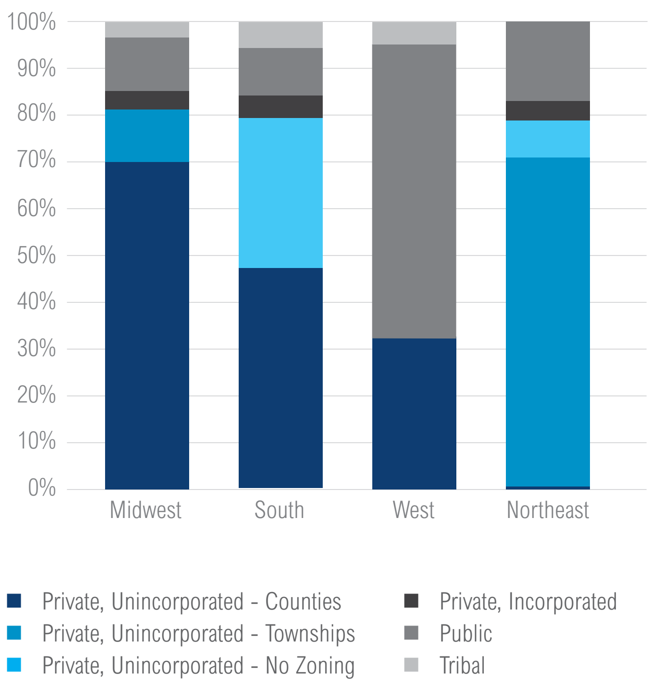
neighbors must be willing to allow the character of their neighborhoods to change and local officials must balance private property rights with the greater public interest. Agricultural preservation is an important part of planning discussions, and many counties choose to preserve some prime land for farming while allowing development on other land.

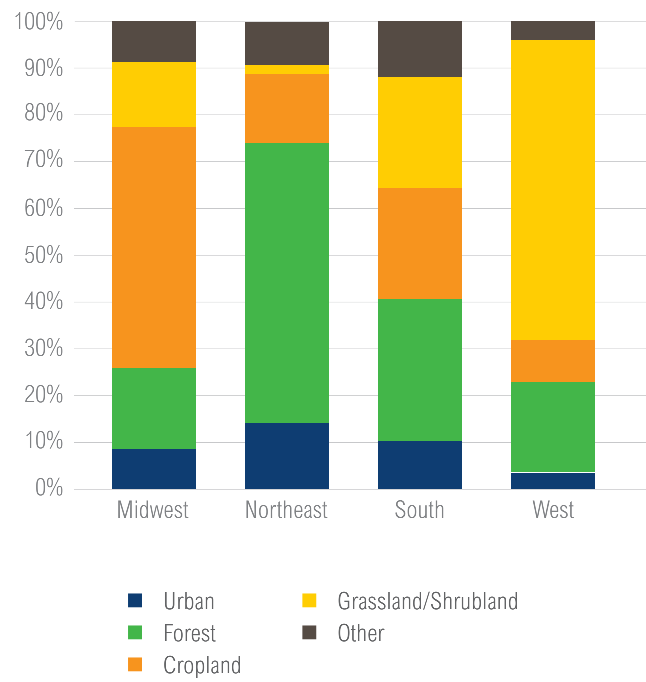
Understanding precisely how land is used, in conjunction with jurisdictional authority over land use, is important for understanding the possibility of development in certain areas. As incorporated urban areas expand and populations increase, counties direct development throughout nearby unincorporated suburban and exurban areas. Land use and authority data help to shed light on some of the difficulties counties face in managing a growing population but still do not capture every barrier to development, like topography. Some land may simply be too difficult or expensive to build on, perhaps due to steep, mountainous terrain, unstable wetlands or flood risks. City annexation of county land can also create funding challenges for county services: as growth continues in a region, municipalities will sometimes annex unincorporated portions of the county and collect tax revenue which previously flowed to the county.

In many areas, counties are the closest governments to the land, so they can understand the particular nuances affecting specific subzones and can work with residents to decide how best to shape the community using planning and zoning tools.

COUNTY AUTHORITY IS DEPENDENT ON LAND INCORPORATED

Breakdown of Land Use Authority and Land Cover, by Region





Source: *NACo analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Gazetteer Files (Counties; Places; County Subdivisions); U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1: U.S. Geological Survey data release; NACo Analysis of U.S. Geological Survey, Annual NLCD Collection 1 Version 1, 2024 Land Cover (CONUS).*

Note: *Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this analysis because land cover data for these two states is not available for 2024 from USGS.*

County Priorities in Land Use

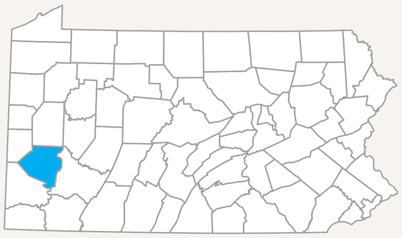
Across the U.S., counties face a wide variety of unique challenges related to land use. Land use touches upon many of the issues counties face, from housing to energy to economic development.

Housing

The availability of housing that is affordable and accessible is a pressing concern in urban, suburban and rural areas alike. In many tourist-based communities, short-term rentals and second homes have added to the challenge of providing affordable homes for residents. Land use policy helps set rules and standards for housing development, including where and what type of housing may be built, design parameters such as lot sizes and setbacks and infrastructure concerns such as the need for new roadways or utility lines. Many jurisdictions, particularly those with growing populations, are concerned about how zoning regulations impact the ability of developers to build new housing units while balancing other priorities such as preserving local character and protecting environmentally sensitive areas.

In Practice: Finding Suitable Land for Development in Grand Traverse County, Mich.

Grand Traverse County, on the northeastern shore of Lake Michigan, has long been a popular tourist destination and has seen a population influx in recent years. This has translated into higher housing costs for residents: median home prices in the area have surged from roughly $250,000 in 2019 to $414,000 in 2025, making affordable housing a pressing concern for county officials. One strategy to encourage the production of more affordable housing has been to develop a new **Zoning Atlas** tool in partnership with the local Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and Housing North, a policy-focused nonprofit. The Zoning Atlas standardizes and simplifies zoning designations across jurisdictions into a single comprehensive map, helping policymakers and developers identify ideal areas and potential barriers for future housing development. As part of phase II of the project, the county added a **Growth Corridor Map** to show the best opportunities for additional housing development. Housing North hopes to extend the atlas across ten Northwest Michigan counties by the end of 2026. Grand Traverse County also moved to an online application system to expedite permitting and inspection approvals.



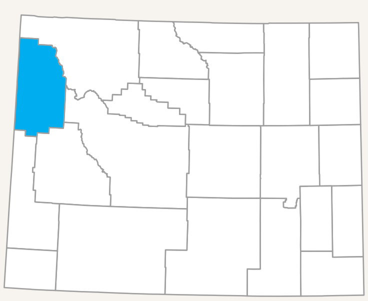
In Practice: Addressing Homelessness Within Existing Land-Use Conditions in Allegheny County, Pa.

Allegheny County's experience demonstrates that counties can rely on creativity and coordination to influence housing outcomes instead of pursuing land-use changes or additional land-use authority.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Allegheny County – like many counties nationwide – faced a growing number of people experiencing homelessness and staying in shelters for longer. These changes in homelessness and shelter utilization, coupled with an inadequate supply of affordable housing, made it increasingly difficult to move individuals and families into stable housing.

In response, the County launched "500 In 500," an initiative with the goal of making 500 affordable units available to move individuals and families from shelter to housing. Rather than pursuing changes to its underlying land use authority, the county used tools that complemented its existing land use to quickly, safely and humanely induce the rehabilitation or adaptation of housing units and connect them with individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

The initiative brought together Allegheny County, the City of Pittsburgh, housing authorities, nonprofit organizations, foundations, developers and advocates to align resources, remove barriers, expand housing availability and accelerate housing placement. By treating existing land use as a reality to be worked within rather than a barrier, the county was able to lean into coordination, investment and problem solving to improve housing delivery. As Allegheny County reported, **the initiative exceeded its original** goal, identifying 568 housing units and housing 620 people by day 500.

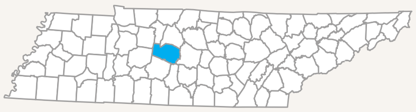


In Practice: Workforce Housing in Teton County, Wyo.

Teton County, home to Grand Teton National Park and portions of Yellowstone, is known for its natural beauty and rural character. However, local workers often struggle to find affordable housing within commuting distance of their jobs catering to the region's tourist economy. To help address this issue, Teton County has made **deed-restricted affordable housing** available to all households with at least one adult working for a local business and earning less than 160 percent of the Median Family Income (MFI). Additional workforce housing is available for households who earn at least 75 percent of their household income locally; there is no maximum income for workforce housing. All deed-restricted housing is offered through a weighted, random drawing. **Officials expect this program to dovetail with other efforts** to increase local housing supply and ensure the region's continuing economic vitality and accessibility to people of all income levels.

Economic Development

Counties often incorporate economic development goals into long-range master planning and may approve specific projects through a planning commission or board. County leaders understand the benefits of growing businesses and an expanding job market for the community and generally support development in any way we can, whether by actively attracting new investments or by building out the infrastructure needed to support a growing local economy. Moreover, since property taxes are the top revenue source for counties,[18] some counties may consider the financial implications of land use through "fiscal zoning" to maximize economic benefits while limiting costs,[19] knowing that additional tax revenue can lead to improved or expanded services for residents. Adjustments in property tax policy can similarly incentivize certain uses, such as higher-density housing or commercial land, and disincentivize other uses.



In Practice: Building a Shopping Center in Williamson County, Tenn.

This suburban county just south of Nashville is also Tennessee's wealthiest, driving demand for retail outlets and other consumer-oriented businesses. However, the county's character also remains largely rural and development politics can be complicated, as Simon Property Group found out this year when the company **proposed a luxury mall** on a highway-adjacent stretch of unincorporated agricultural property. Residents voiced concerns to the county commission about the infrastructure impacts the 100-acre mall would have on surrounding areas, especially increased traffic on the two-lane road connecting the property to the highway. In response, Simon has promised a road-widening project as part of the development and highlighted potential economic benefits of the project, including 3,000 new jobs and up to $7 million in sales and property tax revenue. The mall is set to begin construction in 2026 and open in 2028.

In Practice: Sustainable Quarrying in Outagamie County, Wis.

This central Wisconsin county sits on a geological deposit of limestone, a key ingredient for cement production, which has prompted several quarries to form in the area. However, residents remain wary of the expansion of quarries further into their communities, as shown when the county zoning committee recently approved a **special exemption permit** to develop a new gravel quarry on an agricultural plot of land adjacent to an existing quarry and exurban residential areas. Nearby residents expressed quality-of-life concerns such as noise and truck traffic, as well as the potential for longer-term environmental impact from toxic materials leaching into local groundwater and harming wildlife. Under the approved proposal, the quarry would operate for 20 years, after which the land would return to agricultural or natural uses. The county ultimately **approved the proposal with two amendments**: extending the distance for groundwater well guarantees to half a mile from the original quarter-mile, and approving the project for the land owner, not the land. That means if the property is sold, the new owner would have to go through a new approval process

Disaster Management

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and wildfires are becoming increasingly common – and expensive – across the U.S.[20] In response, many jurisdictions are reconsidering developments in the most vulnerable areas and using hazard-based land use planning tactics. In the West, the most widely affected areas are part of the "wildland urban interface" [21] where urban areas abut dry, mountainous areas that are particularly prone to wildfire outbreaks. Meanwhile, the South faces increasingly common hurricanes and major storms, making flooding a preeminent concern. In both cases, jurisdictions are looking for ways to discourage further development in the highest-risk areas and direct new building activity to lower-risk areas.

In Practice: Mandatory Buyouts in Harris County, Texas

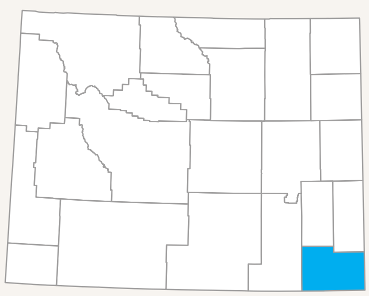
After Hurricane Harvey caused billions of dollars' worth of property damage across Greater Houston in 2017, local officials began to reassess developments in vulnerable floodplains. One solution that the county commissioner's court, the county's local elected body, settled upon was a **mandatory buyout plan** for about 585 residents in seven particularly flood-prone areas. The county would buy the residents' homes and fund their relocation while turning the land into green space to act as a natural flood buffer. It was the first county-level mandatory buyout plan in the U.S., and administrators encountered several challenges during the process, particularly in securing buy-in from affected residents, many of whom were low-income and did not speak English as a first language. Harris County's experience may hold important lessons for future policymakers considering relocation efforts as flooding concerns continue across the Southern and Eastern U.S.

In Practice: Managing Fire Risk in Wasatch County, Utah

This fast-growing county is situated in the mountains east of Salt Lake City, where dry landscapes and wildfires – and the elevated insurance premiums that accompany them – are a perennial concern. In response, local officials are looking for ways to make their communities more fire-safe, especially those in the wildland urban interface (WUI) that abut areas of high fire risk. One strategy involves **assessing fees** for properties in WUI zones to reduce risk by encouraging property owners to take mitigation measures. The revenue would help pay for future wildfire preparation efforts. Another strategy involves **partnering with federal agencies** and other organizations to restore landscapes and watersheds in the Wasatch Range, much of which is made up of federal public lands. The initiative, called the Wasatch Wildlife Crisis Landscape project, seeks to reduce risk on 382,000 acres of land across four high-priority "firesheds."

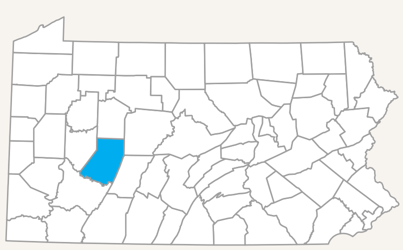
Energy and Utilities

After declining for about two decades, the demand for energy has more recently begun growing again with the development of energy-intensive technologies such as electric cars and high-powered computer facilities. In response, counties are considering not only whether to allow additional energy infrastructure on their lands, but also what type of energy generation and transmission. The potential for air, water, noise and soil pollution, as well as expansive geographic footprints and encroachment on neighboring communities, are significant factors shaping local debates over electricity generation and development.



In Practice: Community Concerns to Wind Farm Development in Laramie County, Wyo.

Laramie County, home to the state capital of Cheyenne, is largely composed of the types of open spaces preferred by wind farm developers for their high generation potential. However, a recent plan to build a 56,000-acre wind farm, three times Cheyenne's land area, **met vigorous opposition from local residents and landowners** at a recent board of commissioners meeting. Despite assurances from the developer, Spanish energy company Repsol, that the project would have minimal impact on surrounding land and provide substantial economic benefits, locals still voiced concerns about their viewsheds and the potential for turbine fires, as well as skepticism that the company would follow through with promised mitigation measures. The board of commissioners also analyzed the short- and long-term impacts to surrounding land and wildlife when considering the proposal. County zoning authority is fairly limited in Wyoming, and in most cases, counties must approve any applications which comply with current zoning regulations, even if there is community opposition. In this case, however, since all the energy from the project would have flowed to surrounding states – and none to Laramie County – the commission ultimately voted 3-1 to deny the development after deciding that such a large project would have a net negative impact to the general health, welfare and safety of the community, though the company has requested judicial review..

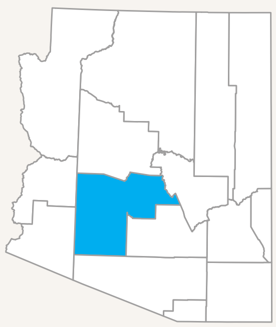


In Practice: From Coal to Natural Gas in Indiana County, Pa.

Coal has long powered the economy of this rural county nestled in the Allegheny Mountains. However, the coal generating plant in the county seat of Homer City shut down earlier this year and is expected to **make way for a 4.5 GW natural gas plant** set to open in 2027. Many locals hope the new plant, which would be the largest natural gas plant in the U.S., will help stimulate a stagnating local economy and bring much-needed tax dollars to fund county services. Others voiced skepticism that the economic benefits will materialize and expressed concerns that the power plant's footprint will grow with increasing electricity demand. In the end, the county planning commission approved road relocations for the project, and the state department of environmental protection issued an air quality permit, clearing environmental hurdles for development.

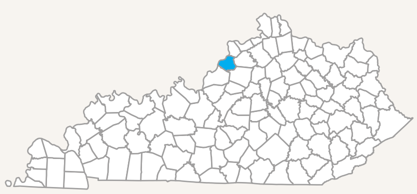
Hyperscale Data Centers

Increasing demand for AI computing and other hyperscale data services in recent years has led to a corresponding increase in demand for data centers, plus the electricity that powers their processors. While many counties recognize the potential economic benefits of locating these data centers in their jurisdictions – i.e., the jobs and tax revenue and the trillions of dollars in infrastructure investments – local leaders are also considering the additional energy consumption and environmental impacts of data centers and computing infrastructure.[22]



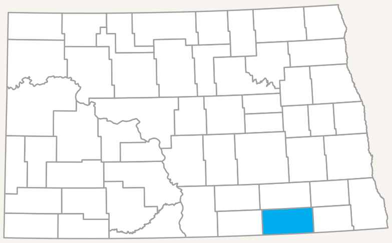
In Practice: Managing Data Center Demand in Maricopa County, Ariz.

Maricopa County recently updated its zoning ordinance to define data centers and ensure they are located in appropriate industrial zoning districts. Data centers are permitted in general industrial and heavy industrial districts, where they must meet the same development standards as other industrial projects, including requirements for infrastructure, drainage, screening and controls related to noise, vibration, heat and glare. Proposed data centers outside those districts must go through the county's rezoning process, which allows the Board of Supervisors to determine whether the use is appropriate for the site and impose site-specific conditions.



In Practice: Navigating Community Concerns in Oldham County, Ky.

Oldham County has drawn interest from artificial intelligence boosters as a potential site for data centers in its exurban and rural areas northeast of Louisville. However, a conditional use permit application to build a "hyper-scaled" 600-megawatt data center earlier this year **drew intense backlash from community members**, who quickly formed an organized opposition. While proponents of the project emphasized the tax revenues and economic development the data center would bring to the county, opponents expressed concerns not only about the proposed data center's impact on the local environment and rural character of the community, but also about its power consumption and potential impact on local electricity rates. A revised, scaled-down version of the project similarly drew intense controversy, despite being proposed in a different location. In response to the local opposition, the Oldham County Fiscal Court ultimately passed a 150-day moratorium pausing all data center applications in the county. Similar political battles could play out throughout Kentucky, which passed tax incentives in 2025 to encourage greater investment in data centers and AI infrastructure in the state.



In Practice: From Farmland to Data Centers in Dickey County, N.D.

Like many agricultural Great Plains counties, Dickey County's population has been declining in recent decades. Local officials hope a new $7 billion data center, currently under construction in a rural farmland area outside the county seat of Ellendale, will revitalize the local economy and attract new residents. Because of the county's rural nature, Dickey County had no zoning laws on the books to dictate how the data center should be constructed. Local officials, including on the municipal and state levels, collaborated with the company, Applied Digital, and were able to reach an agreement to incorporate the data center's land, supporting Ellendale with additional property taxes. These developments prompted the County to establish a set of formal zoning ordinances, which were officially adopted in April of 2026. However, there is still community friction around the project, and some residents have expressed concerns about the data center's potential impact on the environment and the county's rural character. Nonetheless, officials noted that the county's decades-long population decline has recently reversed, which may be a sign the data center is having a positive impact. Estimates from the town and county show that the data center will contribute an additional $12 million of property tax revenue by 2028 to support schools, fire departments, EMS and other local services. Local sales tax collections, too, have increased from less than $400,000 in all of 2022 to nearly $3.2 million in just the first half of 2026.

County Land Use Authority and Public Lands

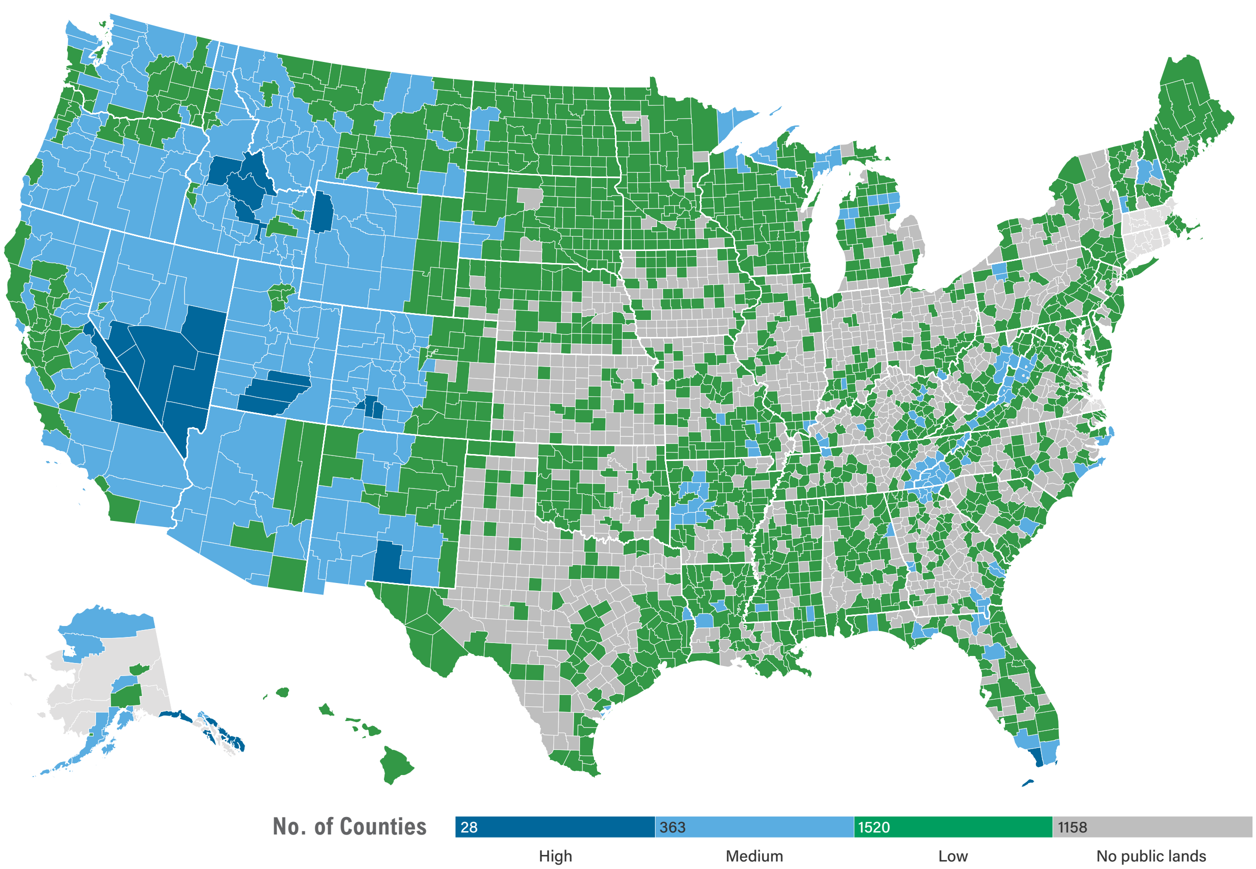
Public lands, typically managed by state, federal and/or tribal governments, add a layer of complexity for county land use authority.

The modern conception of public lands in the U.S. began to take form during the mid to late 1800s when Congressional policymaking pivoted from public lands disposal to management, responding to mounting problems of overuse and degradation. Modern public lands management agencies formed in the early to mid-1900s, including the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Department of Defense (DOD) all of which continue to manage federal land today.

Federal public lands are managed under a multiple use framework that directs agencies to balance a combination of uses, including recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish habitat, in a manner that meets the needs of present and future generations without impairing the long-term productivity of the land, all of which can bring additional revenues and resources to local governments.[23]

NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF COUNTIES CONTAIN FEDERAL PUBLIC LAND

County Categorization by Federally Owned Public Land



Source: *NACo analysis of U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 3.0 (ver. 2.0, March 2023).*

TOP FEDERAL AGENCIES OVERSEEING PUBLIC LANDS

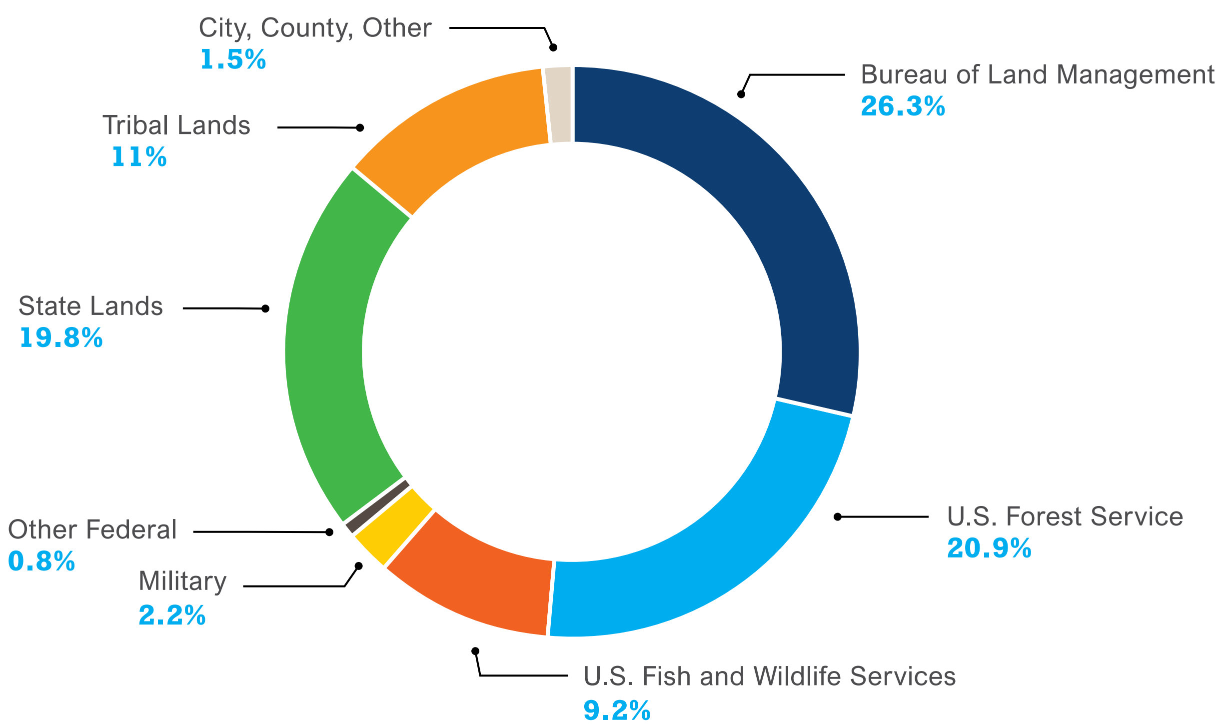
Today, about two-thirds of public lands nationwide are held by the U.S. federal government, while state and tribal governments oversee most of the remainder. Only about 1 percent of public lands are held by city or county governments – generally urban parks, public buildings and other public facilities. High public lands counties tend to rely on federal PILT funds to make up shortfalls in their budget from lack of taxable land.

Among federal lands, the vast majority are managed by the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service. The National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also manage substantial amounts of land, and some land is dedicated for military purposes, energy, conservation easements or research and development. Regulatory authority over public lands generally falls to the agency or agencies managing the land. Because public lands tend to be rural in nature, public land use policy has traditionally focused on multiple use and sustained yield.

Federal public lands are managed under distinct but complementary statutory frameworks. The U.S. Forest Service administers National Forest lands under the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 and the National Forest Management Act of 1976, while the Bureau of Land Management administers public lands under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 — each directing their respective agency to balance competing land uses in a manner that is sustainable and responsive to the needs of local communities. However, there is often considerable tension between these two goals at the local level, since stakeholders may have competing philosophies on how they should be balanced.[28]

TWO-THIRDS OF PUBLIC LAND ACRES ARE FEDERAL

Ownership of Public Lands in U.S.



Source: *U.S. Geological Survey, Gap Analysis Program (2024), Protected Areas Database of the United States (PADUS) version 4.1, as reported in Headwaters Economics' Economic Profile System.*

However, because most public lands are directly managed by state, federal and tribal governments, they tend to fall outside the direct jurisdiction of counties. Due to their classification, local governments cannot collect property tax on public lands, which can cause financial strain for counties.[24] The Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program was created by Congress in 1976 to help counties alleviate this strain by compensating counties directly for unrealized property taxes on federal public land.[25] Additionally, the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program compensates timber counties for loss of revenue share due to changing federal policies to facilitate transition toward long term fiscal stability. **In general, counties must work within the intergovernmental space with state and federal policymakers to align local priorities with federal policies, ensure sustainable land use and maximize community benefits.**[26]

The bulk of public land is located in the West, but public land can be found in every state. In fact, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of counties have some federal public land.[27] Areas with the lowest amount of public lands tend to be in the Lower Midwest and Northeast. Public lands in the West tend to consist of rural wilderness and undeveloped land. Public lands in the East are generally smaller and dedicated to specific purposes like parks and military facilities. There is also a significant presence of tribal lands in the Upper Midwest and Southwest, which, although often categorized as public land, is used differently from other types of public land and under the control of tribal governments.

HOW COUNTIES CAN INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENT ON PUBLIC LANDS

- **Cooperating Agency Status:** Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), counties can request formal cooperating agency status from BLM, the U.S. Forest Service or other lead federal agencies, giving them a seat at the table during the scoping and drafting phases of both environmental assessments and environmental impact statements — not just during public comment. Cooperating agency status allows counties to help define the scope of analysis, provide local data and expertise, and ensure that socioeconomic impacts to the community are meaningfully considered before a federal decision is made.
- **Comprehensive Plan Consistency:** Under FLPMA Section 202(c)(9), BLM is required to coordinate with state, local and tribal governments to assist in resolving inconsistencies between BLM land use plans and local land use plans, to the maximum extent consistent with federal law and the purposes of FLPMA. Under NFMA Section 6(a), the Forest Service is similarly required to develop and revise land management plans for units of the National Forest System coordinated with the land and resource management planning processes of state and local governments and other federal agencies. A well-developed county comprehensive plan and resource management plan that address public lands — including resource use, transportation corridors, wildfire risk and economic priorities — create a statutory basis for counties to engage in both BLM and Forest Service resource management planning processes. Counties that lack updated comprehensive plans lose this leverage entirely.
- **Local Permitting Authority:** While federal agencies hold decision-making authority over projects on public lands, counties retain permitting authority over roads, infrastructure and land use decisions on county-administered land that intersects with or supports federal projects. This authority gives counties a practical point of influence over how development connects to and affects surrounding communities.

Because land use authority on public lands tends to fall outside counties' direct jurisdiction, it is difficult for them to exert direct control over development and land use in these areas. However, counties can exercise "soft power" by leaning on relationships with other levels of government and using policy tools to express priorities and values related to certain types of land use. Counties are not passive observers in federal land management decisions. Early, structured engagement through cooperating agency status and plan consistency requirements gives counties substantially greater influence than public comment alone.

Below are strategies some counties have used to influence another jurisdiction's decision making:

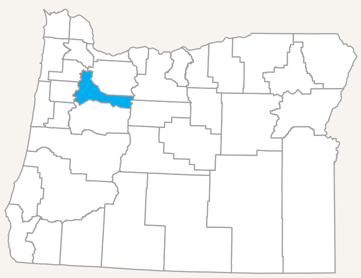
- **Engage state and federal agencies in planning:** Although counties do not have zoning authority over state and federal public land, counties can engage state and federal agencies in county and regional planning processes to develop a shared set of priorities for how particular lands can be used.
- **Pass resolutions:** Counties can express official positions on public land use issues by approving resolutions supporting or opposing proposed state and/or federal policy.
- **Cooperate with state and federal agencies:** Intergovernmental agreements can help align county priorities with those of the state and federal government, combining local knowledge of policy issues with the financial and physical resources of higher levels of government.
- **Develop natural resource management plans:** These plans can establish official county priorities and policy positions on public lands issues like energy, grazing, timber, recreation and wildfire management. Advanced planning and formal documentation can help counties better participate in federal land use decisions.

In Practice: Grazing, Mining and Local Land Use Policy in Custer County, Idaho

With less than 5,000 residents, Custer County is a small, rural county in central Idaho dependent on agriculture, forestry and tourism for its economy. Almost all (93 percent) of its land is federally managed public land – a higher share than any other county in Idaho. The mining industry experienced growth then declined in the county, but it remains a top source of revenue. With such a small share of private land in the county, a lot of economic activity takes place on public lands, and residents often must make use of federal permits for their livelihood. Custer County commissioners, therefore, developed a framework for coordination with the federal government in their **comprehensive plan**, outlining overarching land use policy goals, as well as objectives for specific issue areas like economic development and natural resources. The plan emphasizes the importance of multiple use lands and federal-state-local coordination.

In Practice: Cooperating with BLM in Clark County, Nev.

Clark County, home to nearly three-quarters of Nevada's population, has over 4.5 million acres of federally managed land within its borders, comprising 88 percent of the county's total land area. Because the county is heavily urbanized and continues to build new housing at a rapid pace, there is considerable pressure to develop public land. **The Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act**, passed in 1998, governs sales of BLM lands to allow for development in specific areas of the county. In addition to creating a standardized procedure for land sales to private entities, the law also directs portions of the revenue from federal land sales to state and local governments and provides discounts to developers of affordable housing projects.



In Practice: Forest Management in Marion County, Ore.

Marion County holds 226,100 acres of federal public land, comprising nearly one-third (30 percent) of the county's total land area, as well as over 50,000 acres of state forest or park land. The county's major population centers are located in the western portion of the county, while most of the eastern half of the county is covered by forest land. To help establish a framework for conversations with state and federal agencies, Marion County leaders developed a chapter on forest management in the county's **comprehensive plan**, as required by law for all counties in Oregon. The chapter includes a clear goal for forest and timber management, as well as land policies specific to that type of land.

In Practice: Intergovernmental Wildfire Resilience in Okanogan County, Wash.

At the top of Washington state on the Canadian border sits Okanogan County, home to 45,000 residents and 1.6 million acres of federal public land – most of which is located in the mountainous Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. The state also manages two state forests and multiple wildlife areas, and Colville Indian Reservation takes up another 700,000 acres, making intergovernmental cooperation crucial for the county, especially to mitigate the impact of wildfires. As a result, the county is engaged in collaborative wildfire resilience and forest restoration efforts with the U.S. Forest Service, bringing together federal agencies, tribes, conservation groups and local stakeholders to shape active management of federal forests. The county's **comprehensive plan** sets clear goals for wildfire resilience, which have helped to shape these intergovernmental conversations.

Conclusion

Counties have played an integral role in managing U.S. land from the start of our nation. Despite wide variations in geography, population size and jurisdictional authority, counties remain the core unit of government for community planning and land use decisions. Town and city issues too often spill beyond the borders of incorporated areas, while state governments struggle to take into consideration regional idiosyncrasies. As the unit of government closest to the land and to the people in many areas, yet one able to take a wider, regional view, counties are well-positioned to guide the development of housing, businesses and energy generation while also considering regional environmental impacts, mitigating the effects of natural disasters and stewarding public lands.

By forming strong partnerships with federal, state and other local governments while also creating avenues for resident input, county leaders can strike the balance between private property ownership and the public interest to effectively manage over 2.2 billion acres of our nation's land for the good of all Americans.

For more information on public lands counties, check out the **National Center for Public Lands Counties**

For more information on America's 3,069 county governments, check out the **County Landscape Project.**

Endnotes

[1] Allison Shertzer, Tate Twinam and Randall P. Walsh, "Zoning and Segregation in Urban Economic History," Regional Science and Urban Economics 94 (Jan. 2021).

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[10] Native Land Information System analysis of 2019 Native Land Area Data from the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (accessed May 2026).

[11] NACo Housing Task Force, "Advancing Local Housing Affordability: NACo Housing Task Force Final Report," *National Association of Counties* (Aug. 2023).

[12] Semida Munteanu, Jenny Schuetz and Sydney Zelinka, "Updates on the State of Statewide Housing Policy: New Insights into Implementation and Results," *Lincoln Institute of Land Policy* (Jan. 2025).

[13] Jesse Richardson, Meghan Gough and Robert Puentes, "Is Home Rule the Answer? Clarifying the Influence of Dillon's Rule on Growth Management," *Brookings Institution* (2003).

[14] NACo research, 2026.

[15] Economic Research Service, "Major Land Uses – Documentation," U.S. Department of Agriculture (2025). Note: We exclude surface water area from this analysis. See also: Clayton Winters-Michaud, Alfredo Haro, Scott Callahan and Daniel Bigelow, "Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2017," *USDA Economic Research Service* (2024).

[16] The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban areas as: "Densely populated areas [which] include census blocks with a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile, surrounding blocks with a density of at least 500 people per square mile, and less densely settled blocks that form enclaves or indentations or are used to disconnect discontinuous areas with qualifying densities" (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2010)

[17] Economic Research Service, "Major Land Uses – Documentation," *U.S. Department of Agriculture* (2025).

[18] See NACo, "The County Landscape Project: Taxes and Revenues" (March 2025).

[19] William A. Fischel, "Fiscal Zoning and Economists' Views of the Property Tax," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2013).

[20] See NACo, "Counting the Costs of Post-Disaster Reimbursement: County Fiscal Impacts of Federal Disaster Response," (Feb. 2024).

[21] U.S. Fire Administration, "Wildfire and the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)," *U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency* (Apr. 2020).

[22] See Morgan Stanley Institute, "AI Is Now a Macro Variable. Are You Positioned?" (Mar. 2026).

[23] National Center for Public Lands Counties, "History 101: America's Public Lands from Founding to Framework, 1776-1946." *National Association of Counties* (May 2025).

[24] Although tribal lands generally exercise authority over land use of their own lands, these lands are held in trust by the federal government, making them distinct from land directly owned and managed by federal agencies.

[25] National Center for Public Lands Counties, "Primer for Counties: Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS)," *National Association of Counties* (September 2025).

[26] National Center for Public Lands Counties, "History 101: America's Public Lands from Founding to Framework, 1776-1946." *National Association of Counties* (May 2025).

[27] NACo analysis of U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP). Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 3.0 (ver. 2.0, March 2023) DOI: 10.5066/P9Q9LQ4B

[28] Sarah Bates, "Discussion Paper: The Changing Management Philosophies of the Public Lands," *Natural Res. Law Ctr., Univ. of Colo. Sch. of Law* (1993).

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