

WESTERN STOCK RANCHES AND LIVESTOCK FARMS

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WESTERN REGIONS

Stock ranching, that phase of American agriculture which still has its romantic connotations, is predominant in the land that lies west of a transitional zone which marks the change from successful farming that is not irrigated to the country where crops depend on irrigation or on other special techniques. This transition zone extends north and south through the central and western parts of North Dakota and South Dakota and Nebraska, then through the western part of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Within this zone there are localized areas of stock ranching but, as a rule, most of the lands with suitable topography and soils have been plowed and the native rangeland is gone. Characteristically this zone has an average annual rainfall precipitation around 20 inches in the northern plains and 25 inches in the southern plains.

West of this zone are many livestock operations that should be characterized as stock farms rather than stock ranches. These stock farms may have considerable acreages of native grazing lands, but they provide a limited part of the year-round livestock maintenance for such farms. A considerable part of the Great Plains is diversified with livestock and with dry-land agriculture, and a combination of cash-grain production and the production of cultivated livestock feed and forage crops. Then too, in many of the irrigated valleys of the West, a type of operating unit has developed that is characterized as a stock farm rather than as a stock ranch.

Eastward of the transitional zone, which runs north and south through the Plains States, there are many agricultural areas with a predominance of farm types that would be classified as livestock farms, according to Census definitions. These may be farms with a sizable herd of beef cattle, a flock of sheep, a livestock feeding and fattening enterprise, or a hog-production enterprise.

We see then that the livestock ranches differ from the livestock farms in that the stock ranches use extensive acreages of native grazing lands, whereas livestock farms have fewer stock and more cropland. In the arid and semiarid parts of the 17 Western States the stock ranch depends mainly on the forage production of natural grazing lands. The acreage of native rangeland required by a stock ranch usually varies between 12 and 100 acres of rangeland per animal unit, defining the animal unit as 1 head of mature cattle or 5 ewes. It is not, as a rule, economic to use grazing lands of any lower capacity than 100 acres per animal unit.

One may see this picture graphically by referring to Figure 1, which shows by a dot map the location of farms in the United States. The number of farms becomes progressively fewer as one goes westward through the Plains States. This is indicative of the fact that the stock ranches operate very extensively over large acreages. One sees how irrigation projects have influenced the development of farming operations in the West. For example, the irrigation farming development is clearly indicated in central Utah, in the Central Valley of California, and in the Snake River Valley as it extends across southern Idaho.

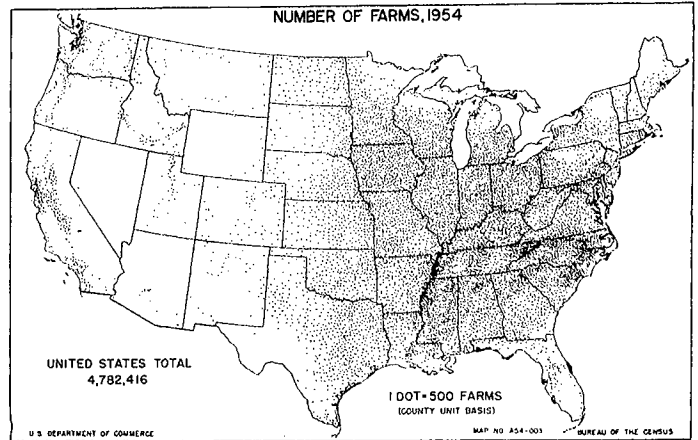


FIGURE 1.

Extensive use of large acreages, both privately owned land and public lands, is a common characteristic of stock ranches (see Figure 2). In the Rocky Mountains and westward there are, in addition to the privately owned lands, large acreages that are not held within the ranches and stock farms; this is especially true of the 11 Western States. These lands that are not in farms are principally in Federal public ownership. They are mainly lands reserved for the national forests, lands of the public domain now held chiefly in Federal grazing districts, lands held in wildlife refuges, lands withdrawn for reclamation development, and the other Federal public lands. In the 11 Western States some 155 million acres of mountainous uplands are in the national forest, and some 140 million acres of arid public domain lands are in the Federal grazing districts.

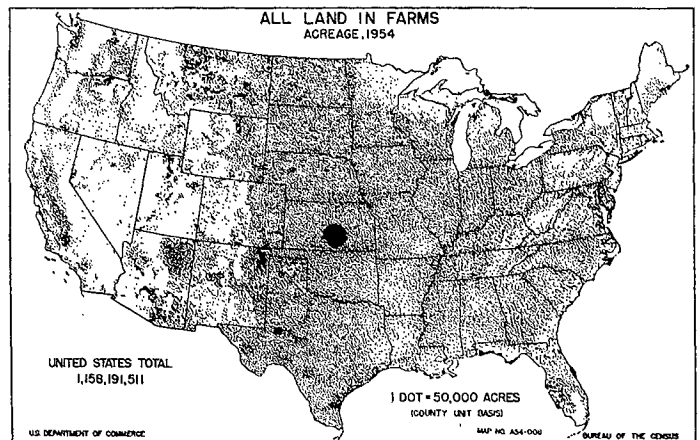


FIGURE 2.