

Here's Who Owns the Most Land in America

The 100 largest private landowners in the U.S. own 40 million acres—an area the size of Florida.

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Jeff Bezos spent summers on his grandparents' ranch in Texas as a kid, learning how to, among other things, castrate cattle.

Today he has his own spread in the Lone Star State, where his company Blue Origin tests its reusable New Shepard rocket. The world's wealthiest person amassed the 420,000 acres over two decades to become the 26th-largest private landholder in the U.S.

He's in rich company with a relatively new kind of landed gentry—billionaires including John Malone and Ted Turner—and with families whose ancestors purchased their parts of America generations ago. The 100 largest owners of private property in the U.S., newcomers and old-timers together, have 40 million acres, or approximately 2% of the [country's land mass](#), according to data from [the Land Report](#) and reporting by Bloomberg News. Ten years ago, the top 100 had fewer than 30 million acres.

It may not seem like much—all told, just about the size of Florida. But land is an often-overlooked repository of wealth, one of those quiet assets, such as artworks or trusts, that make up so much of the country's unexamined riches as inequality widens.

Sources and methodology

The identities of the 100 largest private landowners and their respective acreage, per state where available, were provided by the Land Report from its most recent Land Report 100 ranking. This annual survey, which is compiled by the publication's research team, is based on information secured from landowners and their representatives, published reports, offering memoranda, industry experts and online databases, including tax records.

From this list, Bloomberg compiled more than 1,000 names of people and corporate entities associated with the top 100 landowners. These names were then used to identify parcels controlled by the individuals and families (and any affiliated entities) on the Land Report's list.

Bloomberg obtained parcel data, principally geographic boundaries and mapping files, directly from counties, as well as from third-party providers that extract county-level data.

A primary source was [Pitney Bowes's](#) Property Attributes Parcels Plus data, which the company filtered to find holdings registered to individual and business names on Bloomberg's relevant entity list. The isolated property records were then joined to the Pitney Bowes Parcel Boundaries data. Once a match was found for the state and name, the record was added to a final data table. Bloomberg then uploaded the resulting data into QGIS for geometry verification and mapping.

Additional parcels were identified by Bloomberg directly using county websites and [AcreValue](#) Plus data. While the list of landowners is based on 2018 holdings, as defined and compiled by the Land Report, the parcels mapped by Bloomberg were those owned by or registered to the aforementioned affiliated entities during the reporting and research phase in early to mid-2019.

Where county tax records show more than one owner of a parcel from the Land Report's list, the parcel was divided proportionally if specific acreage was provided. Where no proportional acreage was provided, the parcels were divided evenly or in some cases left blank.

Where digital GIS mapping data was unavailable from counties, Bloomberg relied on additional published sources including environmental studies, court documents, real estate listings and property maps available on family or company websites.

Any acreage included in the the Land Report ranking but found to be leased, according to Bloomberg reporting or the landowners themselves, was not mapped.

Alaska and Hawaii were excluded. The Land Report data lists just two properties in those states: a 12-acre resort northwest of Anchorage owned by Louis Bacon and 2,700 acres of agricultural land in Kauai owned by Brad Kelley.

Bloomberg attempted to contact every individual or family represented in this analysis to confirm the total acreage by state attributed to them. In all, 92 members of the list were contacted and 51 responded before publication. Of those, four had no comment—the Simplot, Holding, Reynolds and Hunt families—while two disputed the acreage estimates from the Land Report without providing alternative figures—Llano Partners and the JA Ranch heirs. An additional family, the Brophys, responded after publication to dispute owning a controlling stake in the Aztec Land & Cattle Company, Ltd. land displayed in Arizona, but didn't provide details for verification.

Bloomberg's final 40 million-acre estimate for the top 100 private landowners is less than the 41.5 million-acre total calculated from the Land Report data because of updated acreage figures received from or fact-checked by the landowners. Relative rankings mentioned in the story are based on Bloomberg's updated figures. The 2008 acreage figure used for comparison is from the Land Report.

In the course of Bloomberg's reporting, the Hamer family, who own sawmill operations in West Virginia and are included in the Land Report's 2018 ranking, clarified that they have no substantial land holdings of their own but instead rely on other private landowners to supply timber. In consultation with the Land Report, the Broadbent ranching family was substituted for the Hamer family for the purposes of this story.

Ultimately, 35 million acres were identified and mapped using the above steps, representing 87% of the 40 million-acre total. The 5 million acres that Bloomberg was unable to map were largely due to difficulties accessing county records still in paper form.