



The Disappearing West: California

by the CAP Public Lands Team May 2016

Project overview

The Disappearing West project measures and maps the level of human development in the American West and seeks to answer a vital question: How fast are the region's natural areas disappearing because of development? A team of scientists at the nonprofit Conservation Science Partners, or CSP—working in partnership with the Center for American Progress—reached the following standout conclusions:

- Human development in the West—including roads, commercial and residential development, energy infrastructure, and agricultural and timber operations—now covers more than 165,000 square miles of land.
- Between 2001 to 2011 in the West, a football field worth of natural area disappeared every 2.5 minutes. That adds up to a Los Angeles-sized area of open land disappearing every year.
- A bear walking a random path through natural areas in the West is an average of only 3.5 miles from significant human development. In just 10 years, that buffer between natural and developed areas shrunk by nearly one-third of a mile.

California results

CSP analyzed four categories of human activities, or stressors, that cause the loss of natural areas: agriculture and timber; energy development; urban sprawl; and transportation and infrastructure.

The combined footprint of these human activities occupies approximately 31,000 square miles of land in California.



Roads, transmission lines, and other transportation

Natural area loss in California, by stressor

Stressor	Total area modified by stressor, in square miles		Natural area lost to stressor, in square miles	Percent change in area modified by stressor
	2001	2011	2001–2011	2001–2011
Urban Sprawl	6,203	7,014	811	13.1%
Transportation	4,026	4,147	121	3.0%
Energy	882	972	90	10.2%
Agriculture/Timber	17,257	17,191	-66	-0.4%

California lost 785 square miles of natural area to development between 2001 and 2011. That's equal to 379,953 football fields of open, natural areas.

The leading cause of this loss was urban sprawl, whose footprint grew by 13.1 percent between 2001 and 2011, followed by transportation and infrastructure, whose footprint grew by 3.0 percent in this period.

Agricultural and timber activities cover approximately 17,000 square miles, the largest amount of land used for any type of development in California.

The three counties in California that lost the greatest amount of land based on the percent change in development from 2001-2011 were Contra Costa, Solano, and Sacramento counties.

Of the western states in the continental United States, California experienced the 5th slowest rate of development based on the percent change in development from 2001-2011.

What can be done?

Only 24 percent of lands in California are permanently protected from development.

By incentivizing the conservation of private lands, establishing plans for smart growth, and protecting large, contiguous areas of public lands, decisionmakers can better safeguard California's wildlife, natural beauty, and economy for future generations.

To explore the data, the interactive map, and the full project, visit DisappearingWest.org.