

CURRENT STATUS, LEGAL FRAMEWORK, AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR PASTURES IN UKRAINE



Current Status, Legal Framework, and Management Practices for Pastures in Ukraine

This overview is an adapted version highlighting the key findings of a stakeholder survey and a cartographic analysis of 11 local case studies, conducted as part of the preparation of the original text, “Analytical report on the results of a study of the current status, the legal framework, and management practices for pastures in Ukraine.”

The publication offers a systematic analysis of key aspects of the issue: from the basic definition of pastures, their general condition, and the scale of their transformation to an analysis of discrepancies between legislative norms and practice. Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms for converting pastures into arable land and to regional differences in pastures management and transformation. Additionally, the publication highlights critical current challenges: the impact of full-scale war, biodiversity loss, and an assessment of women’s participation in farming and pasture management.



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The situation with pastures in Ukraine is not merely a temporary crisis. In fact, we are undergoing a profound and long-term restructuring of the entire agricultural sector. It all began in the early stages of land reform, when large land plots were fragmented and divided between many people. At the same time, livestock numbers had rapidly decreased, old economic incentives disappeared, control of land use became insufficient, and the legal status of many former pastures remains unclear.

The reduction in livestock numbers decreased the demand for perennial forage land, while the greater economic appeal of arable land created a persistent incentive to convert pastures into cropland. After all, growing sunflowers, rapeseed, or wheat is much more profitable in the short term than maintaining pastures.

A survey involving farmers, agricultural advisors, scientists, land use planners, and government officials highlighted systemic issues driving the decline of pastures and hayfields, while a cartographic analysis of 11 specific communities fully confirmed their critical condition. Most of the land officially classified as perennial forage lands has already been planted with crops, overgrown with trees and shrubs, or built over. Less than a third of the analysed areas remain relatively untouched – in the form of primary or regenerated grasslands on abandoned lands.

Each region of Ukraine has its own specific characteristics:

- West: Communities have decent municipal pastures and traditions of grazing, but there is a lack of effective management – as a result, the land is often abandoned and simply overgrown with weeds and trees.
- North and Center: The biggest problem is widespread plowing, which local authorities often fail to address.
- South: The region suffers not only from plowing but also from climate change; pastures are being destroyed by drought, soil erosion, and constant fires, leading to the degradation of unique steppe ecosystems.
- East: The situation is much worse due to the war. Mined fields, destroyed infrastructure, and the inability to access the land limit any management of pastures and make possible only satellite monitoring.

Legally, pastures are not some kind of “free reserve” that can be plowed under for sunflowers or corn without liability. They have special status and play an important ecological role, protecting the soil from degradation. They can only be plowed if permits are obtained, and regulations are followed. However, there is a huge gap between the law and reality. On paper, the rules and fines exist, but in practice, there is almost no enforcement.

Of course, the data from our study should be approached with reasonable caution, as these are not nationwide statistics where every hectare has been counted, but rather a “snapshot” of real-world data and observations by people on the ground. Since there were few responses from the South and East, comparisons between regions can only be made as a reference point.

The same applies to the maps: satellite images alone cannot determine whether a specific field was plowed legally or not. To confirm that, there is a need to analyse lease agreements, land titles, and cadastral registries. However, satellite images do allow us to identify places of a change in land use: they clearly show the transformation of pastures into arable land.

Research and Key Indicators

Indicator	Value	What This Means
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		
Stakeholder Survey	59 responses	Farmers, agricultural advisors, scientists, land use planners, government officials – March-April 2026
Cartographic analysis	11 local case studies	55 land plots 3,585.1 hectares of analyzed area across various regions of Ukraine, data from 2025-2026
Legal Analysis	Current legal framework	Land, environmental, and administrative laws
LIVESTOCK FARMING AND DEMAND FOR FORAGE LAND		
Cattle have declined by at least 2-5 times since 1991	90% of respondents	The underlying structural factor – demand for pasture – disappeared before the land itself began to disappear
Decrease in the need for pastures over the past 10-15 years	83% опитуваних	The underlying economic rationale for conversion. Owners and communities see no point in maintaining pastures due to the lack of livestock and income
ACCESS TO PASTURES AND THEIR MANAGEMENT		
Ownership structure: partly privatized, partly municipal	37% of respondents	The most common model is a mixed one, which complicates the adoption of unified decisions
Municipal pastures are accessible to small-scale farms	42% of respondents	In 58% of communities, access is either formal or nonexistent
Respondents are aware of specific cases of liability for violations	12% of those surveyed	Only one in eight believes that penalties for land ploughing are a rare exception
WHAT IS NEEDED: RESPONDENTS' PRIORITIES		
Economic incentives and support programs (the top priority)	75% of respondents	Restrictions without incentives don't work. This is the main message from practitioners
Inventory and transparent rules for access to municipal pastures	59% of respondents	The second priority is to bring order to what already exists

The following pages will explain why the state and local communities should finally: conduct an audit and clearly demarcate plot boundaries, make the rules for using pastures transparent, provide financial incentives to farmers who maintain pastures, assist with the installation of watering troughs or fences, implement modern satellite monitoring to respond promptly to violations, and, just as importantly, more actively involve women in local decision-making, as they often have a better understanding of the day-to-day development needs of their villages.

1. WHAT ARE PASTURES AND HAYFIELDS, AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT

Definition

Pastures	Hayfields
Agricultural land is systematically used for grazing livestock. May be covered evenly with trees and shrubs on up to 20% of the area.	Agricultural land is systematically used for haymaking. This includes areas covered evenly with trees and shrubs, which may account for up to 20% of the plot.

Types by Origin

Pastures	Hayfields
1. Natural steppes and meadows traditionally used for grazing Moderate grazing intensity. May be combined with periodic mowing. Rare species of flora and fauna are found. 2. Natural steppes and meadows with sown forage crops High grazing intensity. Under-sown with predominantly non-native species of clover, medick, and ryegrass. 3. Artificially created (sown) pastures Seeding of mixtures on former arable or degraded lands. Low biodiversity, and intensive use	1. Natural meadows and meadow steppes Regular mowing for hay, often alternating with grazing. Rare plant species are found. 2. Crops of perennial forage grasses and their mixtures on previously cultivated land Typically have higher productivity, but relatively low biodiversity (medicks, clovers, ryegrass, timothy grass, and their mixtures).

Why Pastures and Hayfields Are Important

Biodiversity	Soil Health	Climate	Communities
They support a high diversity of meadow and steppe species of wild grasses, and associated with them pollinators, birds, and other wild species. They preserve populations of rare species – 30% of the species listed in Ukraine's Red Book depend on grassland ecosystems, which primarily serve as pastures and hayfields.	They form humus and maintain a favorable soil structure. They provide a refuge for soil-forming organisms that are vulnerable to agrochemicals and tillage.	They sequester carbon in the soil. They stabilize the microclimate in communities, specifically by retaining moisture better and heating up less than arable land	They support drinking water supplies. A reserve of natural areas for community development and a resource for sustainable farming. Foster community collaboration. Part of the historical landscape and local cultural context. Support for residents' mental health.

2. OVERALL SITUATION: THE SCALE OF TRANSFORMATION

The management of pastures and hayfields in Ukraine is in a state of prolonged structural crisis. The system is changing under the influence of several interrelated factors simultaneously.

Key structural factors

- A reduction in cattle since 1991 by at least 2-5 times (90% of respondents).
- A decrease in the need for perennial forage land over the past 5-10 years (significant or moderate) – 83% of respondents.
- Higher rental and fiscal attractiveness of arable land compared to pastures and hayfields.
- Weak enforcement of established land-use regulations.
- Legal and cadastral uncertainty regarding a portion of former perennial forage lands.

Actual land use. Survey data (59 respondents)

Indicator	Share	What this means
Pastures plowing is common / very common	66% of respondents	The predominant scenario for the loss of forage function and ecosystem services
Pastures are predominantly plowed or used as cropland	42% of respondents	Every other community has experienced an actual loss of pastures
Municipal pastures are accessible	42% of respondents	In 58% of communities, access is only on paper or nonexistent
Economic incentives are needed (a priority)	75% of respondents	Bans without incentives do not work
Effectiveness of enforcement (average score)	2.3 / 5 points	Extremely low - violations go largely unpunished

The assessments of the respondents are supported by an analysis of satellite images. The results of the study in 11 target communities demonstrate the actual scale of land-use transformation, documenting actual changes in land cover through cartographic analysis.

Of the 55 analyzed forage land plots, 63.8% (2,286.8 ha) show signs of being used as arable land or cropland; other data are presented in the table.

Structure of forage lands by actual land use type

Actual status of land	Area, ha	Share of total area, %
Arable land / crops	2,287	63.8%
Wooded areas	272	7.6%
Man-made structures	22	0.6%
Other (grasslands, fallow lands, mosaic)	1,006	28.1%
Transformation index (arable land + artificial land)	2,309	64.4%

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK: LAW VS. PRACTICE

Legally, pastures and hayfields are not a “free reserve” for any agricultural use. They are classified as agricultural land but constitute a distinct land category with a specific functional purpose and ecological significance.

Legal Regulatory Framework

Level	What it regulates	Implications for pastures and hayfields	Practical challenge
Land Category	Agricultural land status	Pastures and hayfields are agricultural lands, but they are not the same as arable land	In practice, this category is mistakenly interpreted as permission for any agricultural use
Land Use Designation	The purpose for which the land plot is used	A change in intended use requires a legal procedure	Actual conversion sometimes occurs without proper documentation
Land use type	Land cover type: arable land, hayfields, pastures	Land use type reflects the forage and ecological functions of the plot	Plowing changes the actual land use and may destroy the forage function
Actual use	Actual status: grazing, arable land, haymaking	Must be reconciled with documentation	This is where the main discrepancy between regulations and practice arises

Mechanisms for converting pastures to arable use

- **Formal change:** through the development of land-use planning documentation, a legally sound approach, that does not always precede actual plowing.
- **Actual plowing:** without formal documentation, simply because the plot is classified as agricultural land (a legally incorrect interpretation).
- **Lease-based conversion:** a lease agreement formally exists but does not prohibit plowing or include conditions for preserving the grass cover.
- **Privatization and land-share mosaic:** pastures were divided into shares or privatized, and afterward, each owner chooses, for example, to plow the land. The cumulative effect destroys the integrity of the land mass.
- **Retroactive legalization of the status quo:** first they destroy, then they seek approval. An approach that rewards violations.

The gap between regulations and practice (based on a survey)

Regulatory requirement	Actual practice	Reason for the gap
Actual use deviates from intended use.	42% of respondents indicated that pastures/hayfields are plowed or used as cropland	Arable land is more profitable + weak oversight
Community pastures are mostly accessible to small farmers	42.4% of respondents report that access is available, while another 30.5% note that access is difficult or limited	No local regulations or infrastructure
Plot boundaries are defined	32.2% of respondents report that boundaries have been partially demarcated, while 28.8% report that they are largely undermarketed	Consequences of land redistribution, incompleteness of the land registry
Violations lead to liability	Specific cases are known to only 11.9% of respondents	Low certainty of punishment

4. REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The regional picture is heterogeneous. The five macroregions face different sets of problems and require different priority solutions.

Region	Current Status	Key Issues	Priority
South	Pastures are under intense pressure to be converted to arable land; some pastures retain their importance as non-arable steppe elements	Droughts, soil degradation, fires, competition with cash crops, difficulty in managing large areas	Climate-oriented conservation, erosion control measures, support for extensive livestock farming, satellite monitoring
East	A combination of high risk of plowing, military restrictions on access, and low availability of municipal land	Landmines, occupation, proximity to combat operations, infrastructure destruction, weak control	Remote monitoring, demining, flexible temporary management models, post-war inventory
Central	High competition with arable land; significant role of lease agreements and agribusinesses; high estimates of land conversion prevalence	Financial attractiveness of arable land, weak enforcement of accountability, tenants pressure, unclear boundaries	Audit of lease agreements, anti-conversion clauses, monitoring of actual use, local pasture support programs
North	A mosaic of plowed, preserved, abandoned, and overgrown areas; a significant portion of former forage lands has been converted	Blurred boundaries, neglect, overgrowth, need to demarcate valuable plots	GIS inventory, identification of valuable areas, control of overgrowth, legal verification of land plots
West	Relatively better availability of municipal pastures and shared-use practices, especially in rural and mountainous/foothill areas	Mismanagement, overgrowth, weak formalization of shared use, limited infrastructure	Cooperation, rules for shared grazing, support for small-scale livestock farming, women's participation in local initiatives



Important: The regional analysis is not a statistical “ranking” of regions. It reflects typical patterns of challenges. It is important to note that even within a single macroregion, the situation can vary dramatically. For example, in the West (according to a spatial analysis of specific communities), the transformation index ranges from 22% to 87% depending on the community. This means that the table serves as a guideline for prioritization, not a definitive conclusion for the entire region.

The transformation index is the proportion of the study area where a change in land cover from natural or seminatural to anthropogenically transformed has been recorded. Alongside plowing, there are patterns of overgrowth, natural reforestation, conversion to abandoned land, partial preservation of grass cover, and local occupation by man-made structures. The transformation index does not prove that a specific plot has been plowed illegally, but it reveals the scale of actual land cover change in areas where official documentation may not reflect it. The index serves as a tool for setting priorities: where to conduct inventories, where to review lease agreements, and where to initiate monitoring.

Transformation Indices in 11 Case Studies

*Transformation Index = (area of arable land + man-made objects) / area of the studied territory * 100%*

Case	Region	Index	Dominant scenario
Begach Village	Chernihiv	93.6%	Almost complete conversion to arable land
Derniv Village	Lviv	86.8%	Arable land with partial tree cover
Mankivka village	Cherkasy	85.0%	Predominantly arable land
Romanova Balka village	Mykolaiv	73.6%	Arable land
Vynograd Village	Ivano-Frankivsk	71.1%	Arable land and woodlands
Makarykha village	Kirovohrad	69.7%	Arable land
Mykolaivka Village	Chernihiv	52.0%	Arable land + significant non-arable component
Rivne village	Odessa	42.3%	Mixed picture
Zarudne village	Sumy	40.4%	Mostly other land types
Ogiivka Village	Kharkiv	31.9%	Lower-level transformation, wartime context
Nyzhnia Velesnytsia village	Ivano-Frankivsk	22.3%	Significant proportion of trees (43%)

An transformation index may conceal fundamentally different scenarios of loss of forage function. Plowing is the most common, but not the only one. Alongside it, there is overgrowth by trees and shrubs, natural reforestation, and conversion to abandoned land. For example, Nyzhnia Velesnytsia (Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast) has the lowest index among all cases – 22% – yet 43% of the analyzed area is covered by woody vegetation. The pasture grazing function has also been lost there, just in a different way. This means that a low transformation index does not indicate that the pasture has been preserved.

5. ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONS: CLIMATE, WAR, GENDER

Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss

Most respondents assess the impact of pasture and hayfield reduction, plowing, or abandonment on the environment as negative (moderate or significant). The highest negative ratings were for fire risks (72.9%) and water regime (69.5%), followed by soil condition (67.8%), dust storm risks (64.4%), and biodiversity (57.6%).

Impact	Manifestation	Consequence
Plowing	Destruction of grassland habitats and soil cover	Loss of steppe and meadow species, soil erosion
Lack of management	Encroachment by trees and shrubs	Displacement of meadow species, increased risk of fires
Drought + degradation	Change in grass composition, drying up of water objects	Decreased pasture productivity, additional costs for maintaining water objects, need for active management

Impact of full-scale war

28.8% of respondents note significant risks of shelling; 11.9% note occupation or prior occupation; 6.8% note landmines or restricted access. Other consequences:

- Physical restrictions on access to land
- Destruction of infrastructure: roads, water objects, farms, equipment
- Reduced capacity for oversight and local self-governance
- Economic pressure: budget deficits are driving an even greater shift toward arable land
- New practices: remote monitoring, postponing land-use decisions until the situation stabilizes

The gender dimension of pasture management

According to the survey results, women participate in household management and the pasture management, but this role remains invisible in formal procedures.

Level of participation	Manifestation	Barrier	Action
Household	Livestock care, feed preparation, dairy production	Invisibility of labor, limited time, low formalization of roles	Training, microgrants, considering the unpaid care work
Local initiative	Participation in informal agreements and rural initiatives	Insufficient access to information and resources	Targeted consultations, inclusion in working groups, dialogue
Formal governance	Local authorities, committees / boards, cooperatives, land use agreements	Insufficient representation and influence	Quotas or minimum standards for participation in advisory bodies
Entrepreneurship	Small farms, processing	Access to financing and land	Grants, loan guarantees, counseling, and facilitating dialogue

30.5% of respondents rate women's participation in formal representative bodies in communities, cooperatives, etc., as low, 27.1% as moderate, 20.3% as high, and 18.6% do not have sufficient information, which may indicate a lack of separate statistics on the number of women, their positions, and their influence on the work.

6. INCENTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF PASTURES AND HAYFIELDS

Respondents expect not only land use restrictions, but primarily economic and governance incentives for pasture conservation. The problem cannot be solved by enforcement alone: while arable land yields higher rent and more predictable budget revenues, pastures offer distributed benefits, including household access to feed, environmental stability, and social support for small-scale livestock farming. If these benefits are not monetized and not taken into account in local policy, the community tends to favor the short-term arable land scenario.

Ranking of Incentives for Sustainable Management of Perennial Forage Lands

Priority	Description	Level of Support
No. 1	Economic incentives and support programs	75% of respondents give this tool the highest priority
No. 2	Inventory and transparent rules for access to municipal pastures	59% of respondents note the need to bring order to what already exists
No. 3	Strengthening control and monitoring, including satellite	42% of respondents agree that it is necessary to make violations visible and disadvantageous
No. 4	Legal mechanisms for shared use	36% of respondents suggest formalizing what is currently based on verbal agreements

Incentives: for whom, what they change, and what is expected

Incentive	For whom	What it changes	Expected Effect
Payments and compensation for preserving grass cover	Landowners, tenants, communities	Reduces the economic advantage of arable land	Preservation of pastures and hayfields from plowing
Support for pasture-based livestock farming	Small farmers, households, cooperatives	Restores real demand for perennial forage land	Use of land for its intended purpose and preservation of ecological functions
Infrastructure development: water objects, fences, access to roads, livestock gathering areas	Communities and land users	Reduces transaction costs associated with grazing	Improves the accessibility and manageability of pastures for small farmers
GIS inventory and satellite monitoring	Communities, government oversight, donors	Makes the actual situation visible	Early detection of land conversion and degradation
Model contracts and local regulations on community pastures	Communities, land-user groups	Formalizes shared use	Reduces conflicts and legal uncertainty
Gender-sensitive grants and training	Women in households and smallholder farming	Enhances agency and access to resources	Strengthens women's leadership and community resilience

7. CONCLUSIONS

The problem cannot be solved by prohibitions or by financial support alone. A comprehensive policy is needed that combines several tools simultaneously.

Key Conclusions

1. Perennial forage lands (pastures) in Ukraine are at systemic risk: the decline in livestock farming and the higher profitability of arable land creates a constant economic demand for land conversion.
2. The problem is not limited to plowing; it is accompanied by land abandonment, overgrowth, loss of productivity due to climate change, and weak formalization of shared use.
3. The legal framework contains provisions for basic protection of pastures, but their practical implementation is weak due to a lack of monitoring, incentives, and the lack of punishment.
4. Regional differences require differentiated policies. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for the entire country.
5. Women are de facto participants in pastures management, but their role is not sufficiently visible in formal procedures.
6. The most promising approach is a comprehensive one: improving the legal framework + developing and implementing sustainable economic models for livestock farming + clearly defining the role of local self-government + ensuring environmental monitoring + supporting small-scale farming.

What actions are needed

Area	Specific Actions
Inventory and boundaries	Comprehensive inventory of pastures; verification of boundaries; audit of the State Land Cadaster; map of available municipal lands
Economic incentives	Payments for maintaining grass cover; support for pasture-based livestock farming; compensation for ecosystem services
Rules for access to pastures	Local regulations on municipal pastures; transparent rotation system; stocking rates; anti-conversion clauses in lease agreements
Land monitoring	Satellite monitoring; photographic documentation; response to land conversion; effective accountability for violators
Infrastructure development	Watering objects, fences, livestock corridors, grassland restoration; advisory support
Gender inclusion	Mechanisms for involving women in decision-making; microgrants; training; representation in working groups

