Summary Report

GHG Inventory for Forests and Trees Outside Forests, 2004 to 2019

San Miguel County, Colorado

Summary

Forests and trees play a key role in mitigating climate change, yet they are often not included in local greenhouse gas (GHG) inventories or climate action plans. San Miguel County, Colorado has taken the first step towards understanding how local changes in land use and tree canopy have contributed to the county's net greenhouse gas profile. Unlike other sectors, land use (in this case, forests and trees) not only emit GHGs, they also remove CO2 from the atmosphere through photosynthesis, and play a critical role in regulating the planet's climate. The information contained in this summary report can be useful when designing climate actions that reduce GHG emissions and/or increase removals of GHGs from the atmosphere.

Key findings:

- Over the period 2004 to 2019, emissions from forests and trees were 13,872 t CO2e per year.

- Over the period 2004 to 2019, the Net GHG balance of forests and trees was -220,913 t CO2e per year.

- Roughly 54% of San Miguel County's total land base of 333,667 hectares (824,507 acres) is forest. Many areas outside of forests are also covered by trees, including an average of nearly 2.7 percent tree canopy on lands outside of forest areas

- Over the same period, annual CO2 removals from forests and trees were -234,786 t CO2e per year. (Carbon removals are represented by negative values.)

- Total GHG emissions for San Miguel County across all sectors could be reduced if additional forests/trees were added to its land base, and/or if losses of trees were reduced further.

Table 1. San Miguel county's GHG fluxes from forests and trees for inventory period 2004 – 2019, all values reported in t CO2e per year

	Removals(t CO2e/yr)	Emissions(t CO2e/yr)
Undisturbed Forest	-201,202	
Forest Disturbances		-1,959
Non-Forest to Forest	-1,292	
Forest to Settlement		4,564
Forest to Grassland		9,822
Forest to other non-forest lands		1,342
Trees outside of forests	-32,292	104
Harvested Wood Products	0	
TOTAL	-234,786	13,872
Net GHG balance	**-220,913**	

Data Inputs

Data used as inputs into the GHG emission and removal calculations are described below.

Land and Forest Cover

GHG inventories for lands are reported in six “land use” categories which were defined by data on land cover—forest land, grassland, cropland, wetland, settlement and other land (barren, snow, ice). San Miguel County’s total land base is approximately 333,667 hectares (824,507 acres), with nearly 1% Settlement (i.e. developed areas of varying intensity), around 54% forest, 40.3% Grassland (which includes hay/pasture, shrub/scrub and other herbaceous cover), 1.6% cropland, 0.3% wetland and 2.9% other land.

Figure 1. Land cover in San Miguel from the National Land Cover Database, 2019

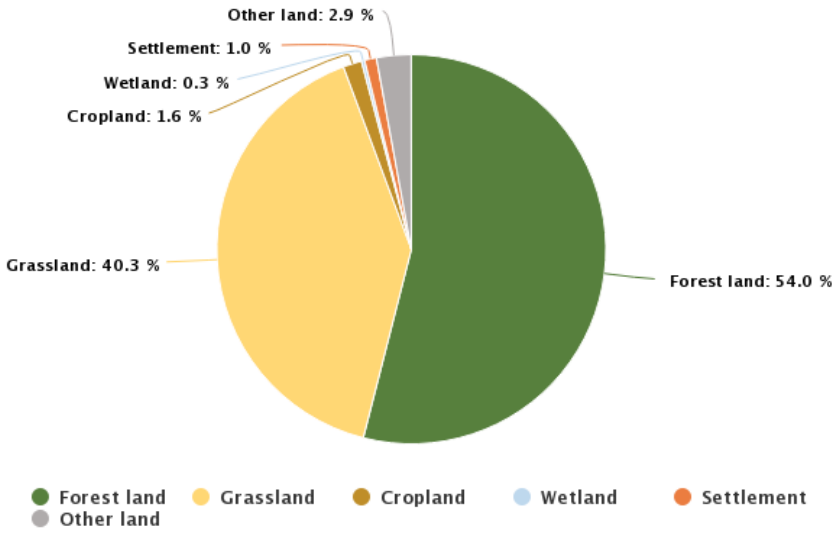
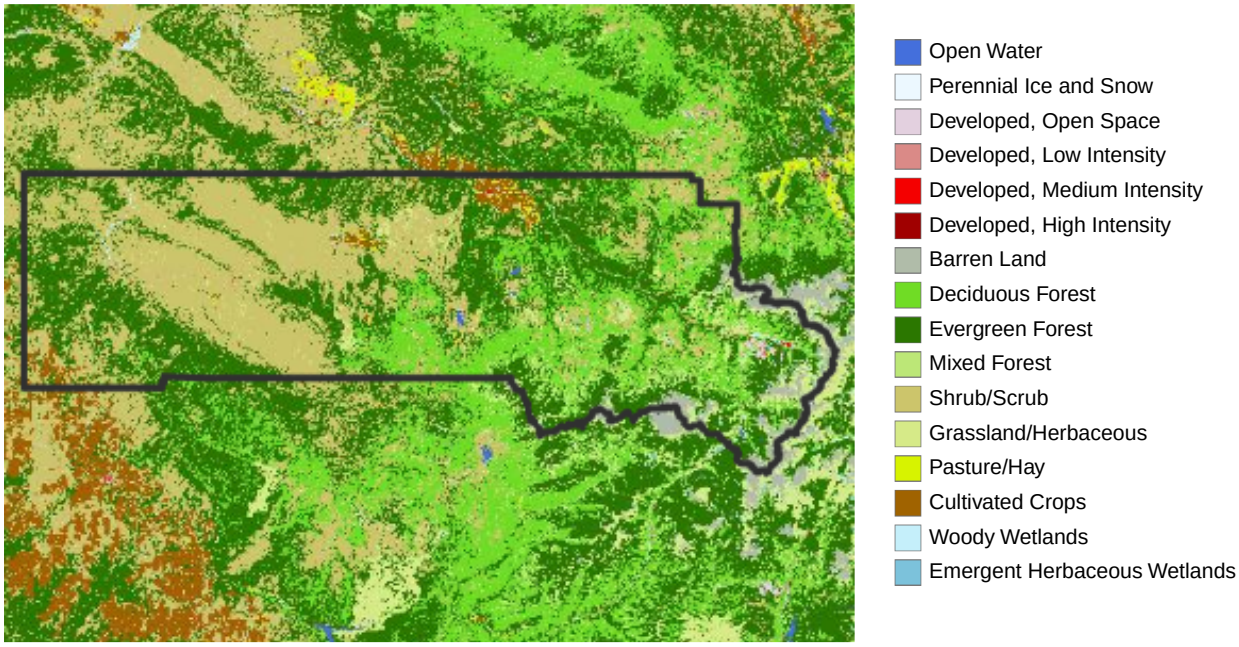


Figure 2. Land cover in San Miguel from the National Land Cover Database, 2019



Forest Cover Change

Generating GHG estimates requires data not just on areas of land use, but also data on how land use has changed over time. Between 2004 and 2019, the county lost around 1,304 hectares (3,223 acres) of forest land, largely conversion to Grassland. Over the same period, the county gained around 575 hectares (1,422 acres) of forest land, largely from Grassland.

Figure 3. Loss of forest to other land use types between 2004 and 2019 (ha)

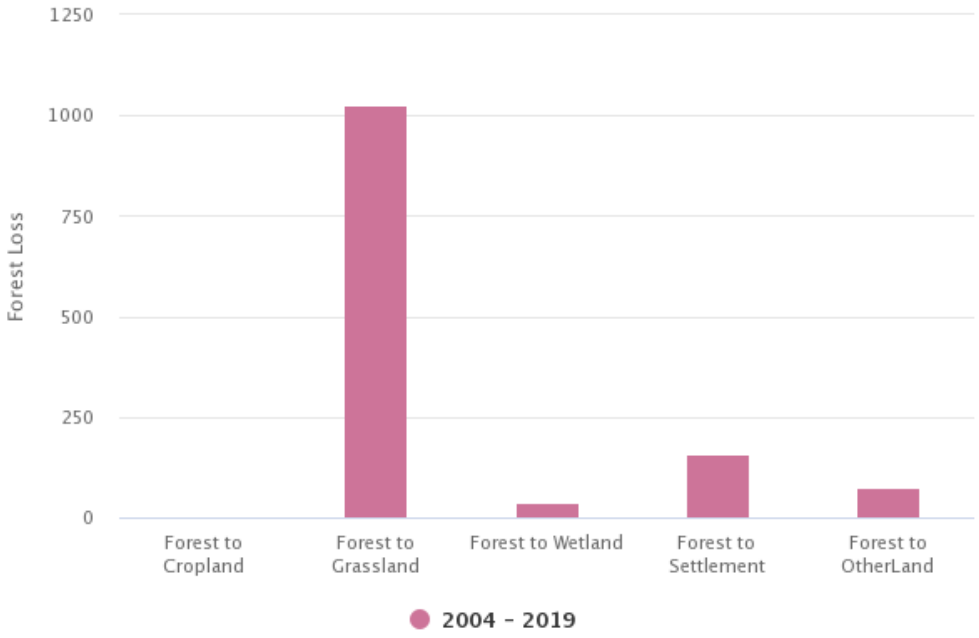
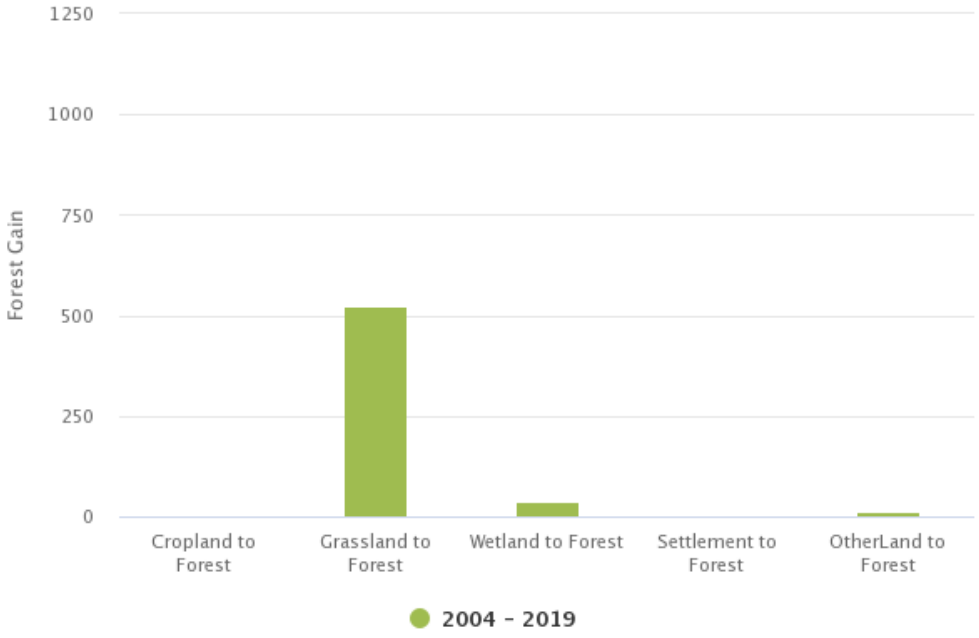


Figure 4. Gain of forest from other land use types between 2004 and 2019 (ha)



Forest Disturbances

Over the inventory period 2004 to 2019, forest disturbance from insects was the most significant in San Miguel County, affecting 63307.6 hectares (156436.2 acres), followed by harvests, which affected 334.1 hectares (825.6 acres) and fires, which affected 36 hectares (89.0 acres).

Trees Outside Forests

Figure 5 shows tree canopy captured by the NLCD tree canopy data. (Note that some areas with high tree canopy in Figure 5 overlap with the NLCD forest class shown in Figure 2.)

This data is only available for the years 2011 and 2016. Over this time period, San Miguel County had an average of 4,074 hectares (10,066 acres) of tree canopy outside forests. Between 2011 and 2016, 0 hectares per year of tree canopy were lost, for a total of 2 hectares (6 acres) of tree canopy loss over the 5 year period. Most of this loss occurred within the Grassland class.

Figure 5. Tree canopy 2016 (Source: National Land Cover Database)

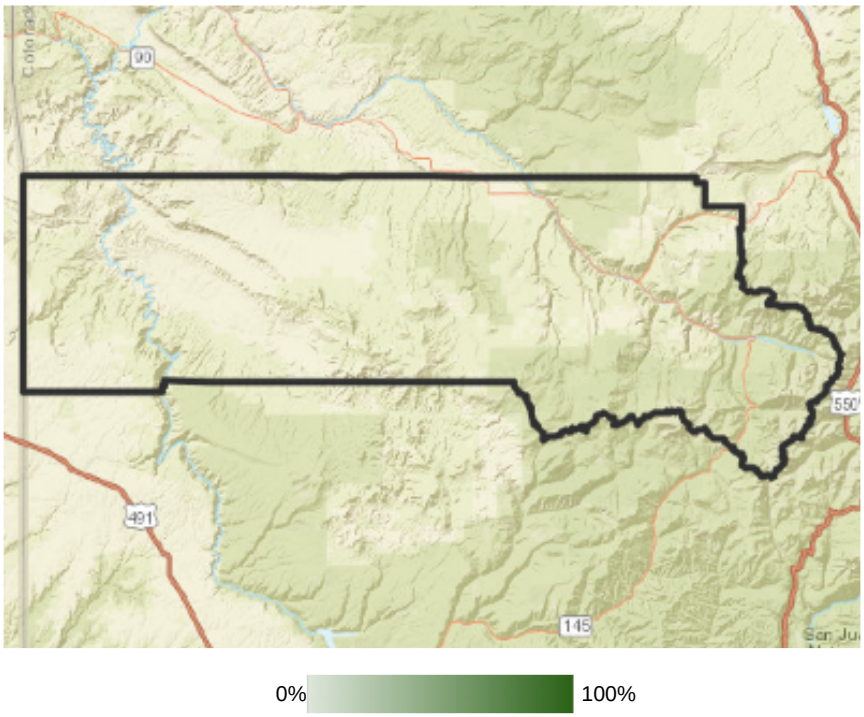


Figure 6: Average tree canopy (in hectares) and % tree canopy in different non-forest land use categories in San Miguel County for the period 2011-2016. Note: bars relate to tree canopy area (left vertical-axis, hectares) and dots are the % tree cover per land use category (right vertical-axis). "Other" category not shown due to very low area.

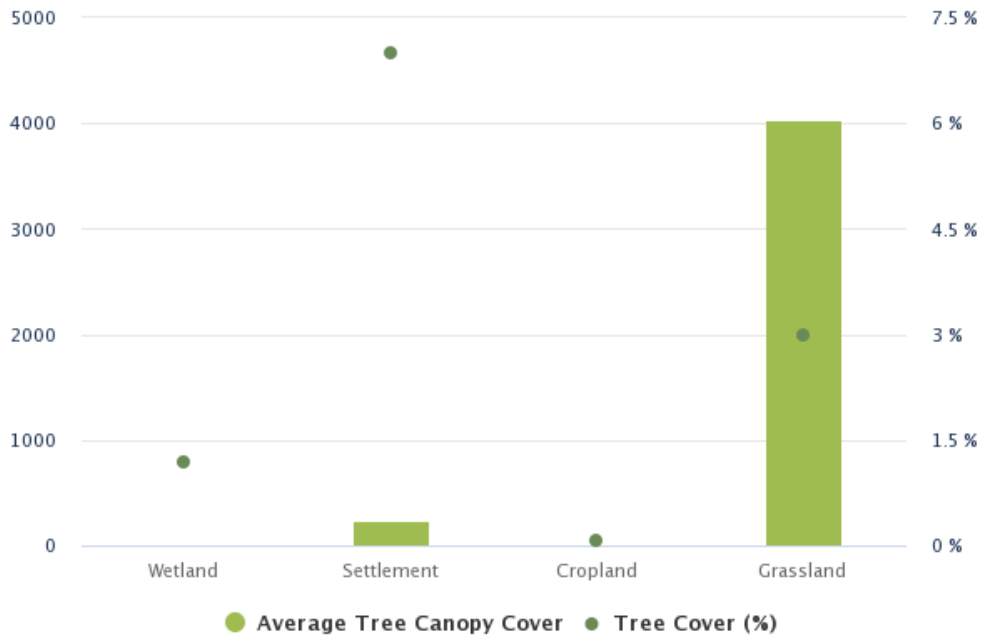
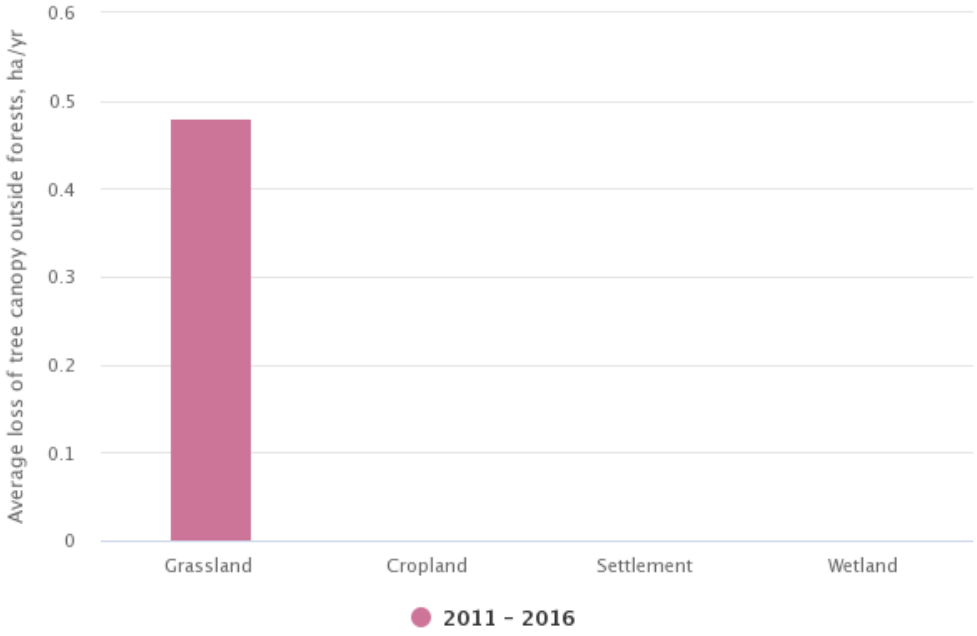


Figure 7: Average area of tree canopy loss in different non-forest land use categories in San Miguel County over the period 2011 to 2016 (hectares per year). Note: other category not shown due to very low area.



Land Cover Change Matrix

Table 2. Full NLCD land cover change matrix for 2004 to 2019. All areas are in hectares.

2019: Top 2004: Left	Deciduous Forest	Evergreen Forest	Mixed Forest	Woody Wetlands	Cultivated Crops	Pasture/Hay	Grassland/Herbaceous	Shrub/Scrub	Open Water	Emergent Herbaceous Wetlands	Developed, Open Space	Developed, Low Intensity	Developed, Medium Intensity	Developed, High Intensity	Barren Land	Perennial Ice/Snow	Total
Deciduous Forest	50,690	174	689	0	0.7	0.1	139	134	2	1	57	4	2	0.5	2	0	51,896
Evergreen Forest	7	120,026	36	0.2	5	0	259	483	18	0.6	71	5	2	0.6	74	0	120,986
Mixed Forest	12	33	6,394	0	0	0	4	9	0.1	0	15	0.4	0.5	0.3	0	0	6,467
Woody Wetlands	0	0	0	1,463	0	0	0	0	0.5	15	0.6	0	0	0	0	0	1,479
Cultivated Crops	0	0.5	0	0	4,711	0	0	101	0	0	1	0	0.1	0	0	0	4,814
Pasture/Hay	5	2	0.2	4	69	1,226	3	27	2	0	3	0.5	0.3	0	0	0	1,342
Grassland/Herbaceous	155	82	17	0.8	0	0	13,753	10,422	7	2	23	2	2	0.2	7	0	24,473
Shrub/Scrub	175	35	45	3	400	2	69	107,986	24	0	9	3	3	0.4	1	0	108,756
Open Water	0.4	2	0	0	0	0	2	0.4	400	3	0.4	0	0	0	0.4	0	409
Emergent Herbaceous Wetlands	0	0	0	36	0.4	0	0	0.1	1	385	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	423
Developed, Open Space	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,784	6	28	2	0	0	1,820
Developed, Low Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,147	16	7	0	0	1,170
Developed, Medium Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	97	1	0	0	98
Developed, High Intensity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	12
Barren Land	0	11	0	0	0	0	5	3	5	0	0	0	0	0	9,501	0	9,525
Perennial Ice/Snow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**51,045**	**120,366**	**7,181**	**1,507**	**5,185**	**1,228**	**14,233**	**119,166**	**460**	**407**	**1,964**	**1,167**	**150**	**25**	**9,586**	**0**	**0**

Table 3. Simplified land cover change matrix for 2004 to 2019.All areas are in hectares.

2019: Top 2004: Left	Forest Land	Cropland	Grassland	Wetland	Settlement	Other Land	Total
Forest Land	179,524	6	1,027	36	159	75	**180,828**
Cropland	0.5	4,711	101	0	2	0	**4,814**
Grassland	525	469	133,488	36	45	9	**134,571**
Wetland	39	0.4	3	789	0.5	0.4	**832**
Settlement	0	0	0	0	3,100	0	**3,100**
Other Land	11	0	8	5	0	9,501	**9,525**
Total	**180,099**	**5,185**	**134,627**	**866**	**3,306**	**9,586**	**0**

Emission and Removal Factors

A summary of the emission and removal factors used in the calculations is provided in Table 4.

	Emission Factor (t C/ha)	Removal Factor (t C/ha/yr)
Forest Change		
Deforestation		
To Cropland	16.48	
To Grassland	39.07	
To Settlement	116.97	
To Wetland	31.10	
To Other	56.57	
Reforestation (Non-Forest to Forest)		-0.61
Forest Remaining Forest		
Undisturbed		-0.47
Disturbed		
Fire	27.56	
Insect/Disease	-0.48	
Harvest/Other	64.23	
Trees Outside Forest		
Tree canopy loss	58.84	
Canopy maintained/gained		-2.16

Harvested Wood Products

Harvested wood products (HWP) temporarily store carbon from the forest ecosystem as the wood goes through a series of production processes and end-uses, with eventual disposal (and emission to the atmosphere). The delay represents a net benefit to the atmosphere. The period of storage varies from long-lived solid wood products that remain in use for long periods of time to products that are quickly disposed of in landfills.

In the web tool, the HWP Calculator tracks carbon in harvested wood through four different “fates,” from harvest to timber products to primary wood products to end-use to disposal, applying best estimates for product ratios and half-lives at each stage. Based on user inputs entered about annual harvest volumes in San Miguel County, the change in the harvested wood pool over the inventory period 2004 to 2019 is estimated as 0 t CO2e per year.

Caveats

Information presented here represents a snapshot in time of the net GHG balance and many of the factors contributing to that balance. The estimates can help identify where policies may be designed to reduce net GHG emissions. This inventory currently uses a simplifying assumption that a loss of forest or trees results in immediate emissions to the atmosphere (rather than delayed emissions in the case of various use cases from long-term storage to shorter decay timelines if sent to landfills). In general, it is important to consider that these estimates represent a relatively short period of time compared with the long-term consequences of policy decisions and land management actions. For example, a forest converted to settlement represents a permanent loss of removal capacity. Over the long term, maintaining forests will sustain a higher rate of carbon removal, depending on age-related growth rates and occurrence of disturbances.

There are significant uncertainties in the estimates. Although not quantified here, typical greenhouse gas inventories of forests using similar approaches, including the national GHG inventory, report uncertainties in the net GHG balance that can be as high as ±45% (with 95% confidence). In the results presented here, the most uncertain estimates involve emissions from land-use change which are based on well-documented remote-sensing products, but relatively few field observations from a statistical sampling of county forests. While uncertainties can be high, the estimates can still provide useful information on the relative magnitude and importance of such GHGs; subsequent analyses can also provide information on the directionality of emissions and removals from land management.

Finally, it is recommended that additional analyses be done using models that project impacts of alternatives over coming decades. Such models are available and have been used in other studies at county scale. The GHG inventory presented here is only the first step to providing science-based information to support policy decisions. To more fully explore the potential impacts of alternate policies, projection models can be used to compare long-term results among the alternatives which typically include a “business as usual” (i.e. no change in policy) alternative. This feature may be added into the web tool in the future.