

# CHANGES OF LAND USERS IN INTERWAR LITHUANIA

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## Abstract

The article presents the analysis of the change of land users in the Republic of Lithuania during the period between 1919 and 1940. The main factor affecting the relationship of land and its use was the political changes in the country, whereas economic and social aspects had less influence. During the period between 1919 and 1939 the land reform of independent Lithuania not only strengthened the country's agriculture, but also laid the foundations for the entire nation-state, it was one of the most significant achievements of independence, a real agrarian revolution, which intensified the land use. The main goal of the land reform was to alienate and distribute the state land and the land of large estates to peasants and to complete distribution of village land into individual farmsteads. Landlords were left inalienable 80 hectares (later 150 ha) of land area. The land from the State Land Fund was distributed to volunteers and new settlers (the landless) peasants up to 8-10 ha, to estate workers and rural craftsmen – up to 1.5-2 ha, as well as to poor peasants, state enterprises, farms and forestries, etc.

Keywords: land users, land reform, poor and landless peasants, farmers, agricultural land.

## Introduction

Lithuania has always been and is an agricultural country, in which long-standing traditions of agriculture have been valued and cherished since ancient times. The agricultural sector plays a very important economic, social, environmental and ethno-cultural function and is considered to be the country's priority sector of the economy. The restoration of the independent state of Lithuania (February 16, 1918) made it possible to change the outdated procedure and create more advanced one. One of such sectors is the redevelopment of land management and land use relations. Lithuania has survived the feudal epoch formed land management and land use procedure – the three-field strip farming and street accommodation system.

In the wake of the First World War storms, Lithuanian agriculture was exhausted. The war mainly affected large farms - estates. In estates, the number of cattle and horse fell twice, many buildings were burnt down, agricultural equipment and machinery were taken away. According to the Law on Land, land owners and land users had to use the land according to the main purpose of use, the method of use, follow special land use conditions established for land parcels, keep to the requirements established in land use planning documents (Lietuvos..., 2004).

The task of the land use planning documents was to determine valuable farming lands, to provide their improvement (road network and drainage system reconstruction, soil reclamation), to choose the area for urbanization and the layout of infrastructure objects, to determine the areas, where afforestation was purposeful and possible. The implementation of the planned solutions had to be performed by municipalities and rural communities (Aleknavičius, 2007).

A. Aleknavičius and P. Aleknavičius analysed the change of the farming land area situated in agricultural land in Lithuanian cultivated areas during the period between 1990 and 2008. During the period of the land reform in Lithuania, the farmland area decreased by 732 thousand ha (21.7 per cent), of which about 450 thousand ha (15.2 per cent) belonged to arable land (Aleknavičius, 2010).

Agriculture is an industry supplying people with the main source of survival - food. Due to the specific features of production process, agriculture slower adapts to the changes in the demand and is less flexible. In this case, employed people and households involved in agriculture are at greater risk of suffering losses, therefore the government uses the money collecting taxes from the whole population of the country in order to support agriculture (Girdžiūtė, 2011).

D. Makutėnienė analysed changes in the size of farmers' farms and the impact of their land area on economic results. It was estimated how the land reform affected the establishment of farms as well as their structural changes, economic changes in the average land area in the country. Results of the study showed that small farmers' farm land is used much more intensively than that in large farms (Makutėnienė, 2004).

E. Abalikštienė and V. Stravinskienė (2011) analysed the use of the land in southeast Lithuania. During the period between 2003 and 2010 six districts, Ignalina, Molėtai, Švenčionys, Trakai, Varėna and Zarasai, having less favourable conditions for farming, were selected for the analysis. The results showed that the number of farms decreased in all districts.

P. Aleknavičius (2012) analysed agricultural land rearrangement works carried out in independent Lithuania. In order to create favourable conditions for agricultural land users he recommended to improve agricultural policies and laws, by providing support to households which purchased the prospective land within the boundaries of their land use and which started to use the abandoned land. During the process of the land reform in independent Lithuania, only land parcels and not farms were designed since 1997, as land territorial units were required to be registered by the law. Thus, land parcels became smaller and more scattered. Since the formation of the farm land holdings were left to a chance, the rearrangement of the layout of land parcels would be solved during the repeated land management works and during the preparation of land consolidation projects.

All agricultural development forecasts (carried out at Lithuania scale) are more optimistic and are associated with purposeful regulated activities by the state: "Agricultural land use plan is appropriate to the recommended farm specialization, corresponding to soil characteristics. Agricultural land area in Lithuania, after the identification of a neglected agricultural land, can be increased to 3 million ha" (Aleknavičius, 2012).

Since Lithuania is an agricultural country, it is important to analyse the land use and the change of land users during various political and social events of the country. The aim of the paper was to describe agricultural land use peculiarities in Lithuania during the period between 1920 and 1940.

In order to achieve the goal the following tasks have been set:

1. to analyse the use of the land in Lithuania during the first period of independence (during the period between 1919 and 1940);
2. to analyze the land use structure and change;
3. after the analysis of the legal, historical documents and statistical data of the analysed period to provide basic land use characteristics of the analysed period.

### **Methodology of research and materials**

In order to achieve the aim the following research methods were used: the study of scientific literature and legal documents, the analysis and synthesis of statistical indicators, the analysis of mathematical processing and comparative analysis. The study was carried out using the data obtained from the Department of Statistics, the National Land Service under the Ministry of Agriculture as well as from the Lithuanian Agricultural Information and Rural Business Centre for the years 1920 and 1940.

### **Results and discussion**

***Land use during the period between 1920 and 1940.*** In the wake of the First World War storms, Lithuanian agriculture was exhausted. The war mainly affected large farms - estates. The number of cattle and horses fell twice in estates, many buildings were burnt, agricultural equipment and machinery were taken away. Totally in Lithuania, except for the region of Vilnius, 1,200 villages with 14,270 farms, 2,000 individual farmsteads, 270 estates and 50 villages with churches were burned. 16% of the fields and as much as 35% of estate lands lay waste (Žemėtvarka ..., 2004). If part of the arable land of estates was cultivated, it was done mostly by small tenants with the help of hand tools. Therefore, in 1918, after Lithuania regained the independence, one of the main tasks of the government was to start the land reform without delay. The main reasons for the implementation of the land reform were as follows: the lack of land for farming families, big economic weakness and disorder in rural land use. Considering the cause of the land reform, the following objectives were set:

1. to provide poor and landless peasants with the land;
2. to dispose of or reduce obsolete ownership status (land holdings belonging to mansions, banks, religious organizations);
3. to unify farming conditions on the basis of the farmstead land tenure (i.e. completing the strip land use);
4. to dispose of easements in estates' pastures and forests;
5. to distribute land to be managed as joint ownership (mostly - common pastures in villages).

In 1919, Lithuanian landlords owned about 1,384 thousand hectares of land, or 26.2% of the national territory (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Land ownership in Lithuania in 1919 (Vaskela, 1998)

<b>Land according to ownership forms</b>	<b>Landholding area, ha</b>	<b>Landholding structure, %</b>
Landlords' land	1,384,000	26.2
Peasants' land	2,932,200	55.51
Patrimony	1,7015	0.32
State land and other land	949,000	17.97
State territory ha*	5,282,185	100

*Lithuanian territory without Vilnius and Klaipėda regions*

One estate owned on average 490 ha. There are no accurate land distribution data, but it is considered that in 1919 the peasants' farms owned 2,932 thousand ha, or 55.5% of the total land. Landless peasants accounted for about 21% of the population working in agriculture at that time. Small and very small peasants, who were landowners, accounted for about 25%. The share of landlords and their family members made up only 1.1% of the rural population (Vaskela, 1998). Consequently, imbalanced distribution of the land was evident.

According to the survey of the year 1919 conducted by the Land Reform Commission, 94.6 thousand of poor and landless peasants wanted to get about 1,550 thousand hectares of land. A number of villages still had retained the old land relations – they owned land by strip three-field system of farming. Till the First World War in Lithuania (without Vilnius and Klaipėda regions) about 910 thousand hectares of land (3,886 villages) were distributed into individual farmsteads. According to the statistics of the Department of Land Management, there were 9,604 villages (about 180 thousand farms) in Lithuania in 1919 still not distributed into individual farmsteads. The area of not distributed villages and towns covered 1.973.3 thousand ha (Žemėtvarka ..., 2004). Economic, social and political conditions were reasons, which influenced the implementation of the land reform.

612 thousand ha of the land left without owners or the land once owned by the state estates or owners from other countries, landlords or Russian colonists, were taken over by the State Land Fund. The largest areas of the land were taken from the landlords – up to 84% of the expropriated land. According to the data of L.Truska there were 1,301,544 ha of land in the State Land Fund (Table 2) (Vaskela, 1998).

**Table 2**

The State Land Fund in Lithuania during the period between 1919 and 1940  
(according to the data of L.Truska)

<b>State Land Fund sources</b>	<b>Area, ha</b>	<b>Structure, %</b>
Land of private land owners:	1,247,837	95.87
of which forests and water reservoirs	592,127	45.59
State land	11,173	0.86
Land belonging to churches and monasteries	2,194	0.17
Land belonging to Land Bank	2,687	0.21
Peasant land bank	26,166	2.01
Other land	11,487	0.88
Total	1,301,544	100

Foreign citizens have been banned from owning and buying land in Lithuania. During the reform the land of the larger estates was expropriated, leaving the owners 80 ha of land rate. In 1929, the inalienable land area was increased to 150 ha. Landowners received compensations for expropriated land according to the law.

The most intense land rearrangement and distribution related to the State Land Fund took place during the period between 1923 and 1930.

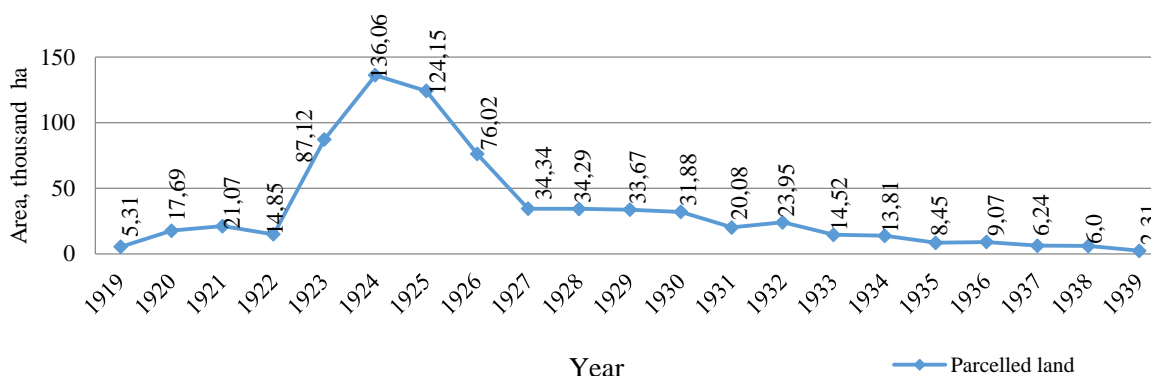
The land was distributed to about 65 thousand families. Peasants had to pay redemption fees for the received land. First of all, the biggest land parcels were given to the former officers and soldiers, who were drafted in the year the state was established, as well as to honoured persons of political parties of

independent Lithuania. Landless peasants or those who owned no land at all received from 8 to 20 ha of land, labourers and craftsmen of rural estates received from 1.5 to 2 ha of land.

According to the State Land Fund, the land was distributed in the following way:

- to poor and landless peasants - 453 thousand ha;
- to state-owned enterprises and forest farms – 35 thousand ha;
- to city municipalities and individual buildings – 9 thousand ha;
- rented to representative and cultural farms – 9 thousand ha;
- for other purposes (easements' elimination, sales, etc.) – 46.5 thousand ha.

Totally, during the period between 1919 and 1940 1,443 estates were parcelled, easements were eliminated in the area of 100 thousand ha. Totally, parcelling affected 720,282.1 hectares that made up 81,837 parcels of land. The parcelling of estates in Lithuania covered about 25% of the territory of the state (Land Management ..., 2004). The progress of the land reform can be seen in Figure 1.



**Fig.1.** Areas parcelled during the land reform (Šalčius, 1998)

Estates were expropriated most intensively during the period between 1923 and 1926, and in 1924 the intensity reached the maximum level; more than 136 thousand hectares of land were parcelled. During the period between 1923 and 1926, 58.6% of the total work carried out during the land reform was executed.

New settlers, i.e. those who had no land until the land reform, were given 362,084 ha to the ownership and 90,629 ha were given to poor people (Table 3). The new settlers' group was divided into two categories: those who have received up to two hectares of the land, and those who received over 2 hectares of the land. The total number of 4,690 people received up to 2 hectares, and they received 8,007 ha of land, in average of 1.71 ha each (Vaskela, 1998).

**Table 3**

Distribution of the State Land Fund in Lithuania during the period between 1919 and 1940 (according to the data of L.Truska)

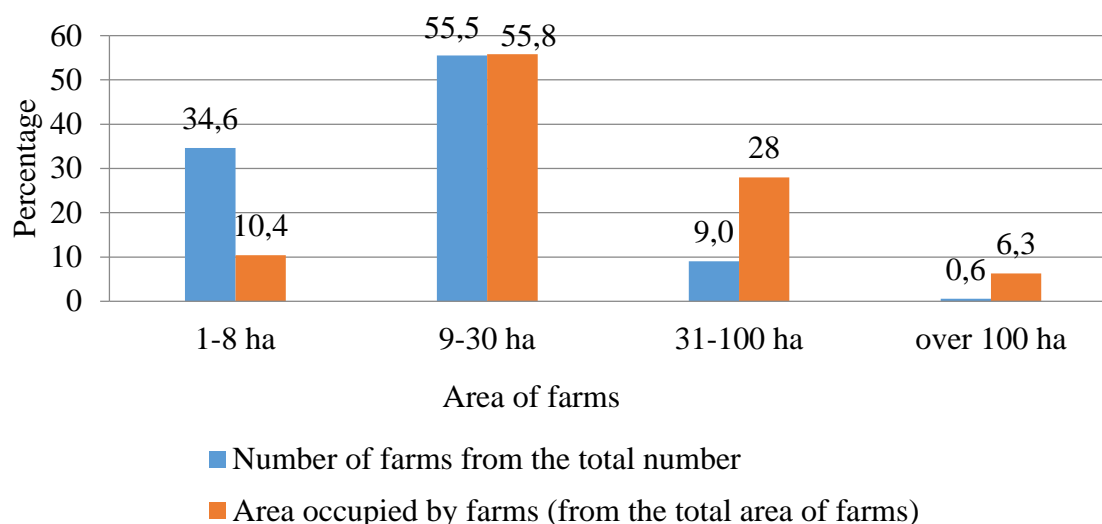
Land given	Parcels	Area	
		ha	%
To new settlers:	38,747	362,084	27.8
up to two hectares of land to rural workers and craftsmen	4,690	8,007	0.61
2 - 20 ha parcels to the landless	33,504	339,371	26.06
more than 20 hectares of land to the landless	553	14,706	1.13
To people having not much land	26,367	90,629	6.96
To rural workers' gardens	7,918	3,287	0.25
To peasants for easements	-	28,214	2.17
Left to landlords	1,734	186,621	14.33
To public institutions, municipalities, governmental organizations, etc.	5,234	50,409	3.87
State forestry and water enterprises	-	557,894	42.84
Sold and allocated to other uses	-	18,109	1.39
Left undistributed	-	5,145	0.4
Total:	-	1,302,392	100

All the independent Lithuanian land reform is divided into two stages: the period between 1919 and 1930, when parcelled estates and villages were divided into households, and the period between 1931 and 1939, when the distribution of the villages predominated. The average managed rural area was 237 ha, and the average household area - 10.4 hectares. However, the Lithuanian villages' distribution to households had not been completed.

During 20 years of the reform the rural land management work was intense and complicated. Lithuania became a country of households. Small parcels dominated in agricultural lands.

According to the data of agricultural census carried out in 1930, there were 287,380 households (4,327,500 ha) in Lithuania. The average farm owned 15 ha of land. Farms from 1 to 12 ha accounted for 90.93% of the total number of farms. There were 99,345 farms having not much land (1-8 ha) across Lithuania, which accounted for about 35% of the total number of farms. They accounted for 10.4% of the total farm area (Figure 2).

There were 159,360 medium-sized farms (8-30 ha), or 55.5% of the total number of farms. They occupied 55.8% of the total farm area. There were 1,602 estates (100 ha and more) or only 0.6% of the total number of farms. They took 6.3% of the total land area of the farm. Meanwhile, before the First World War in Kaunas province alone 46.5% of the land belonged to farms with more than 100 tens (Šalčius, 1998).



**Fig. 2.** Number of farms and their areas in 1930, in percentage ( Žemėtvarka...,2000)

During two decades of the existence of an independent state (during the period between 1919 and 1940) public and peasant land areas increased. Actually, landlords' landholdings disappeared, although formally landowners of landlords' origin saved remnants of the former areas. Landlords' holdings in Lithuania decreased by 15 times during the period between 1919 and 1940. The share of estate land in the state area had declined from 26% to 1.5%, the state land areas had increased from 2.2 to 2.5 times (Table 4).

**Table 4**

Lithuanian landholding percentage change during the period between 1919 and 1940  
(Vaskela, 1998)

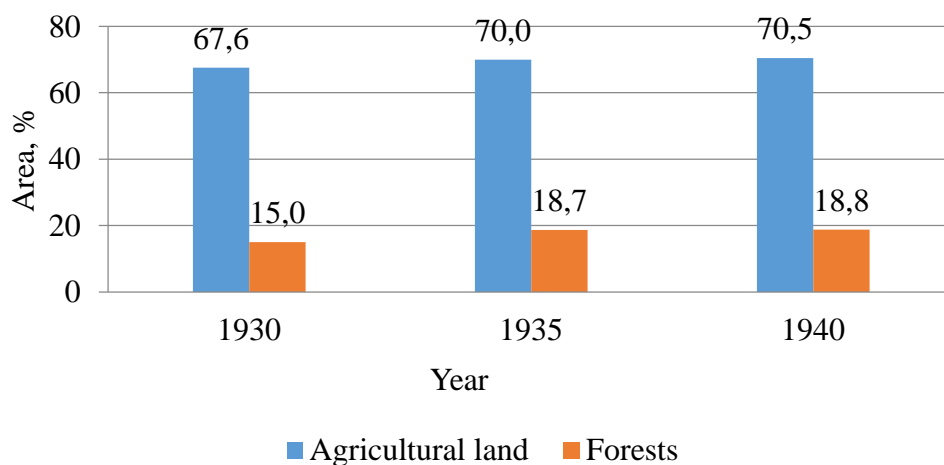
Land owners	1919	1940	Change
State	9.23	18.5-20.5	+9.22 -10.99
Peasants and other farmers	55.51	70.66	+15.15
Landlords	26.2	1.53	-24.38
Church	0.32	0.35	+0.03
Other lands	8.73	6.96 – 8.72	-1.77 – 0.01
Total	100	100	

State land area has increased due to the fact that private forests and larger bodies of water were nationalized. 506,030 hectares of forests and 51,864 hectares of water bodies were expropriated from private owners until 1940 (Vaskela, 1998). The ownership of churches' land changed only slightly, such lands were extremely rare, so this fact did not have a significant impact on the structure of land tenure.

However, the drawback of the land reform was that the newly created private farms were too small for practical use. The land reform law provided the farm size from 8 to 20 ha as sufficient for one family to feed. The concern that settlers would not be able to use the obtained land did not come true. A sharp drop in the number of the poor and the landless was observed that would have positively affected the rise of agricultural production over time, if the Soviet land reform had not followed.

The land reform of the independent state of Lithuania during the period between 1919 and 1939 strengthened not only the country's agriculture, but also laid down the foundations for the national state, it was one of the most significant achievements of independence, a real agrarian revolution, which intensified land use.

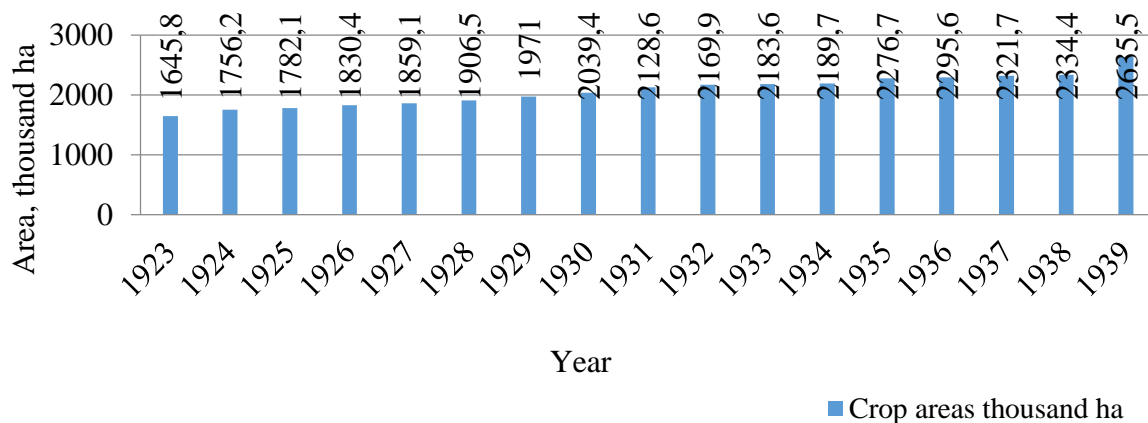
After the removal of three-field agricultural system, areas of virgin soils decreased. In 1912, virgin soils covered 28.4% of cultivated land area, in 1925 - 25%, in 1939 - 15%. Abandoned areas mainly were situated in large farms: in 1919 in large farms - 31.4%, in small farms - 12.6%, and in 1921 in large farms - 18.6%, in small farms - 3.0% (Vaskela, 1998). Agricultural areas increased significantly. In 1930, there were 3,800.9 thousand ha of agricultural lands, which accounted for more than 67% of the total land area, and in 1935 - about 70%, i.e. the agricultural land area has increased by 2.4% (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Agricultural land and forests percentage change during the period between 1930 and 1945 (Povilaitis, 2000)

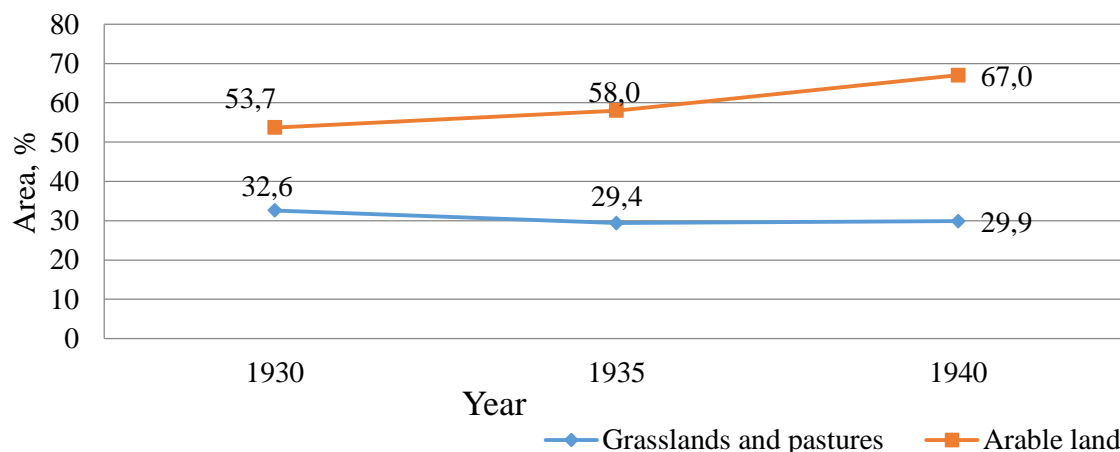
This resulted in important historical processes initiating the wave of the formation of individual farms. Each piece of land was important to the farmers. Even in economically poor soils crops were cultivated. Thus in 1940 agricultural land has already accounted for 4,394 thousand ha, or 70.5% of the entire territory. Along with agricultural land, forest areas practically evenly increased as well. At the beginning of the period (in 1920) Lithuanian forests covered about 15% of the country's territory, and at the end of the period (in 1940) - 18.8%, i.e. forest area has increased by 3.8%.

Arable lands dominated in the agricultural land structure, the area of which increased with increasing crop areas (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** General Lithuania crop areas from 1923 until 1939 (Povilaitis, 1988)

In 1930, arable land accounted for more than half (53.7%) of the total agricultural land area, and in 1940 this number increased even up to 67% (Fig. 5). Scrubs, natural grasslands and pastures were cultivated. Due to this fact areas of grasslands and pastures decreased significantly.



**Fig. 5.** Part of grasslands and pastures as well as arable land in the agricultural land during the period between 1930 and 1945

In 1930, the total area of grasslands and pastures made up 1,283.3 thousand ha or 32.6% of the total agricultural land, and in 1935 – 1,140 thousand ha respectively or 29.4%. Later, these areas stabilized and only in 1940 slightly increased to 1,189.7 thousand ha (Povilaitis, 2000). During the period between 1920 and 1940 the largest area of agricultural reclaimed lands was achieved.

Arable land areas have been verified on the spot during the Agricultural Census in 1923, 1930 and 1935, and during other in-between years the Lithuanian Statistics Office made only corrections. With the establishment of individual farmsteads, areas of gardens increased as well. A garden was an integral part of each homestead. In 1930, gardens accounted for only a small part (0.79%) of the total agricultural land. However, especially during the five years of intensive establishment of individual farmsteads (1930 - 1935) their area increased significantly, and in 1935 they already accounted for 1.13%, or 43.8 thousand ha (Povilaitis, 2000).

However, not all agricultural land was used effectively. Many lands were uncultivated. This trend revealed itself not only in 1919 in the beginning of the Land Reform, but later on as well, when part of the distributed village lands was uncultivated. Furthermore, there was a shortage of equipment, fertilizers, tools for cultivating the land. Not all peasants' expectations were fulfilled. Many lands were unusable. However, an annual increase of abandoned land areas began to decline since 1930. These trends suggest that the current structure of the agricultural land was sufficiently dynamic and unstable. It was dominated by arable land, surrounded by meadows and pastures as well as virgin soils. Agricultural land was located in the mosaic way in small areas situated between the swamps, scrubs and forests.

The most important works that were carried out during the land reform were the parcelling of estates, distribution of villages into individual farmsteads, the abolition of easements and rearrangement of land plots. In addition, land evaluation (grading) was important for land use regulation, which was necessary for the correct allocation of land taxes. The evaluation was based on the parish land productivity and its average selling price. State tax accounted for about 1% of the land price.

### Conclusions.

1. After Lithuania had regained independence in 1918 one of the main tasks of the Government was to start the land reform without delay: to provide poor and landless peasants with land, liquidate or reduce obsolete ownership status (land holdings belonging to mansions, banks, religious organizations), restructure the strip three-field system of land use, liquidate easements in estates' pastures and forests, distribute collectively owned land - common rural pastures.
2. In total during the period between 1919 and 1940 1,443 estates were parcelled, easements were eliminated in the area of about 100 thousand ha. In total parceling affected 720,282.1 hectares, of which 81,837 parcels of land were made up. The parceling of estates in Lithuania covered about 25% of the state's territory.
3. In the period of the analysis, the change of land use trends were as follows: 1) agricultural areas increased by almost 3% during the analysed period, of which: arable land increased by 13.3%, gardens - more than 0.3%, while meadows and natural pastures decreased by 2.7%; 2) forest coverage has increased by more than 3.8%.
4. Since 1930 abandoned land areas began to decline. Agricultural land was located mosaically in small areas between scrubs, swamps and forests.
5. Land evaluation (grading) was necessary for land use regulation in order to correctly allocate land taxes. The evaluation was based on land productivity of the small rural district and the average selling price of the land. State tax accounted for about 1% of the land price.
6. The drawback of the Land Reform was that the newly created private farms were too small therefore irrational for practical use, though the Law of the land reform provided the farm size from 8 to 20 hectares as sufficient for one family to feed.

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