Cartographic Boundary Files

The cartographic boundary files are simplified representations of selected geographic areas from the Census Bureau's MAF/TIGER geographic database. These boundary files are specifically designed for small scale thematic mapping.

When possible generalization is performed with intent to maintain the hierarchical relationships among geographies and to maintain the alignment of geographies within a file set for a given year.

To improve the appearance of shapes, areas are represented with fewer vertices than detailed TIGER/Line equivalents. Some small holes or discontiguous parts of areas are not included in generalized files.

Generalized boundary files are clipped to a simplified version of the U.S. outline. As a result, some offshore areas may be excluded from the generalized files.

Types of Files

The cartographic boundary files are available in shapefile, geodatabase, and KML format. Zipped file packages contain a shapefile or a KML file with file-based metadata in XML format. The zipped geodatabase file packages contain a national geodatabase for a given scale.

Advantages

- Simplified shapes improve the appearance of geographic areas when displayed at small scales.
- These boundary files take up less disk space than their ungeneralized equivalents.
- Cartographic boundary files take less time to render on screen.

Limitations

Geographic areas may not align with the same areas from another year. Some geographic areas are excluded from these files.

These files should not be used for:

- geographic analysis including area or perimeter calculation.

- geocoding addresses.
- determining precise geographic area relationships.

Scale

The cartographic boundary files are available at three target map scales (not all geographic area boundaries are available at all target scales):

- 1:500,000
- 1:5,000,000
- 1:20,000,000