

Viewing Topographical Maps Tutorial

This feature is only useful for properties where there are elevations of more than 10 feet, the greatest detail on free topo maps from the US Geological Survey.

To view a property's elevation and calculate its slope, go to store.usgs.gov.

In the middle of the page, click on "Map Locator & Downloader."

Place the cursor (hand) over your location on the map and double-left-click on it to zoom in, using the cursor to center the location as you go. The zoom feature will only go in so far.

In the right-hand pane, click "Mark Points" to mark anywhere on the property. (Local town names will appear uninvited and highlighted in yellow on the map.)

Click on the orange "Show US Topo and Digital Maps - Beta" button at the bottom of the column.

Click on the orange "Close" button in the information box covering the map.

Click on "Topo." You may have to zoom out to get the contour lines.

Toggle back and forth among Topo, Map, Satellite, and Hybrid to ensure just where you are.

To get better detail you have to buy USGS products.

If you have a meaningful elevation change on your property and can get sufficient detail zooming in on your property, you can calculate the slope between contour lines: Divide 10 (the elevation distance between the contour lines) by the distance between the contour lines to get the slope. For example, if you have a 10-foot bank that stretches 30 feet to the water, you'd have a 33% slope.

The slope calculation may not matter, but the contour map at least lets you see where the steepest slopes occur on the property. The closer the contour lines are to each other, the steeper the slope. This may help in advising owners where to pay attention to potential erosion problems.