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A Study on Establishing a Vacant House Management System in Response to Rural Depopulation

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Summary

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Introduction

According to the 2024 administrative survey, approximately 58.3% of Korea's 134,000 vacant homes are concentrated in rural areas, where the vacancy rate is more than twice that of urban regions, based on the 2023 Population and Housing Census. In particular, towns (eup) are experiencing a rapid increase in vacant multi-unit housing, while townships (myeon) are facing a growing number of vacant, aging single-family homes amid simultaneous population decline and demographic aging—conditions expected to worsen in the coming years.

The government has established a legal foundation for the remediation and utilization of rural vacant houses through amendments to the *Agricultural and Fishing Villages Improvement Act* in 2020 and 2024, and has expanded budgetary support by announcing a series of comprehensive measures between 2023 and 2025. However, despite these policy directions, concrete implementation strategies for how these measures should be applied and operated across diverse rural contexts remain insufficient.

Therefore, to ensure that vacant house management aligns with the characteristics and needs of each region, it is essential to develop a tailored management system that classifies targets for public intervention through an integrated assessment of vacant house types, potential uses, and surrounding environments. Such a system would enable more effective allocation of limited public resources and support more strategic interventions in rural areas.

Domestic and International Policies and Responses to Vacant Houses

In Korea, vacant house management is divided between rural and urban areas under the

Agricultural and Fishing Villages Improvement Act and the *Act on Special Cases Concerning Unoccupied House or Small-Scale Housing Improvement*. Despite this dual framework, both systems follow a similar process: vacant house status survey → improvement plan → improvement project. Policy conditions have continued to improve, including the introduction of integrated survey guidelines (2023), the development of a national vacant house information system, and the preparation of a comprehensive, government-wide management plan scheduled for 2025.

However, practical responses remain insufficient. The vacant house survey is conducted only every few years, making the data outdated, limited in scope, and unable to accurately capture on-the-ground conditions. Current improvement projects also remain fragmented, focusing primarily on the demolition or simple reuse of individual properties. Although *Unoccupied House Priority Improvement Zones* have been introduced, clear objectives and criteria that reflect regional spatial structures have not yet been defined.

Analysis of international cases suggests several key directions for strengthening region-specific vacant house management in Korea. First, vacant house information systems should be enhanced and integrated to support real-time monitoring, owner identification, and reporting mechanisms. Second, policy targets should be set through area-based management tailored to local conditions, drawing on examples from Japan. Third, policy effectiveness can be improved by linking multiple policy tools and broadening stakeholder participation—including specialized agencies and both regional and local governments—as demonstrated in the United States and Japan. Finally, strengthening owner responsibilities while providing technical and financial support, coupled with appropriate incentives, can encourage more active and voluntary participation in vacant house management.

Characteristics and Current Status of Vacant Houses in Rural Korea

This study classifies the vacant house conditions of 1,403 rural towns and townships (eup/myeon) across Korea into nine types based on three key indicators: the current vacant house rate (status), changes in the number of vacant houses over the past three years (trend), and the proportion of single-family houses among all vacant units (structural characteristics). The results show that 740 areas (52.7%) fall into high-vacancy zones with a vacant house rate of 10% or more, followed by 398 areas (28.4%) categorized as emerging vacancy zones (5–10%) and 265 areas (18.9%) as stable zones with less than 5% vacancy. Among the high-vacancy and emerging vacancy areas, the most common type is the “single-family dominant, stagnation type,” characterized by a high concentration of vacant single-family homes but relatively limited recent growth.

These typologies can support local governments in setting policy directions appropriate to their regional characteristics. However, even within the same category, local conditions—such as population change, employment structure, industrial base, and the spatial distribution of vacant houses—may vary significantly, underscoring the need for tailored responses that reflect these contextual factors.

Field investigations in Sangju (Gyeongbuk) and Wanju (Jeonbuk) further revealed numerous vacant houses that were not captured in previous surveys, highlighting both survey omissions and the likelihood of additional vacancies emerging after the survey period. Rural single-family homes often include separate auxiliary structures, which should be incorporated into survey criteria. Moreover, many houses classified as ordinary vacant units at the time of the survey have since deteriorated into hazardous vacant houses, indicating that periodic surveys conducted only every few years are insufficient for timely intervention. As a result, vacant house improvement plans based on outdated survey data may fail to reflect actual local conditions.

There is also a significant gap between improvement plans and on-the-ground project implementation. In Sangju, only 15 of the 141 demolitions carried out between 2022 and 2024 (10.6%) involved properties previously identified as vacant in the survey. In Wanju, despite the presence of high-vacancy areas such as Gogsan-myeon Samgi-ri, no meaningful improvement projects have been executed, revealing challenges related to owner consent and the absence of strategic project planning. To address these limitations, it is necessary to refine the concept of vacant houses to include potential vacant properties and vacant auxiliary structures, update survey methods and frequency to reflect local realities, and ultimately establish a dynamic monitoring system capable of continuously tracking changes in vacant house conditions.

Proposed Criteria and Process for Region-Specific Vacant House Management

The grid-based Vacant House Management Indicators consist of two components: the *Exploring Area-Based Vacant House Management Types indicators* and the *Exploring Vacant House Management Strategies indicators*. These indicators quantify the distribution of data within 500m × 500m grid units, enabling the prioritization of areas for public intervention.

The Exploring Area-Based Vacant House Management Types indicators identify areas requiring intensive management by analyzing vacant house density and predicting vacancy potential. *The Exploring Vacant House Management Strategies indicators* assess conditions of vacant houses, residential and stay environments, the real estate market, and owner/resident consent. Together, these indicators enable town/township-level identification of appropriate

vacant house management strategies, including demolition, adaptive reuse, safety measures, and improvements to local living infrastructure.

Using the nine town/township-level vacant house status types and the indicators developed above, this study proposes a four-step process for region-specific vacant house management:

(Step 1) Diagnose each town/township based on the nine vacant house status types.

(Step 2) Categorize areas into four management types: Intensive Intervention, Status Quo Management, Preventive Management, and Monitoring.

(Step 3) Identify specific strategies for each type.

(Step 4) Link these strategies to policy decision-making structures at the town/township and village levels, and implement projects in phases in connection with rural spatial regeneration and community SOC initiatives.

A pilot application in Sangju City identified 5 Intensive Intervention grids, 10 Status Quo Management grids, 62 Preventive Management grids, and 238 Monitoring grids. In the case of Gonggeom-myeon, the proposed strategy includes designating *Unoccupied House Priority Improvement Zones* for intensive intervention areas, providing housing improvement support in preventive management zones, and carrying out continuous inspections with resident participation for monitoring areas.

Policy Directions and Future Tasks for Establishing a Region-Specific Vacant House Management System

This study identified key policy tasks: 1) advancing the vacant house survey and database, 2) strengthening the substance and quality of vacant house improvement plans, and 3) enhancing the implementation capacity of vacant house improvement projects. Proposed amendments to the *Agricultural and Fishing Villages Improvement Act* include expanding the survey scope, establishing a monitoring system, and improving the criteria for designating *Unoccupied House Priority Improvement Zones*.

This study is significant in that it systematically and quantitatively diagnoses rural vacant houses and proposes a region-specific management system. However, limitations in the reliability of time-series data and the need to further refine the prediction model remain as tasks for future research.

Keywords

Rural Area, Vacant House, Vacant House Management Indicators, Process for Exploring Strategies for Vacant House Management