



**Friends of  
the Earth  
Europe**

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## **Taking the world's land**

**Europe's overconsumption of resources and its  
impacts on people and the environment**

**November 2013**

## Taking the world's land

New research by the Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI) for Friends of the Earth Europe shows the extent to which Europe's consumption levels are not sustainable. By using the example of meat consumption, the study shows that a small population from developed countries, such as in the EU, consumes more than its fair share of land leading to greater global inequalities<sup>1</sup>.

The European Commission's *Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe* published in 2011 identified the need to start measuring the amount of land consumed in Europe with the objective of having a land consumption target by 2013<sup>2</sup>.

The research shows that:

- If the entire global population were to consume as much meat as the population in Europe, we would need 80% of the arable land just for meat production.
- If Europeans were to reduce meat consumption by 50% the EU's land footprint would decrease by 44,058 million hectares, an area equivalent to 1.2 times the size of Germany.

Previous research by the Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI) for Friends of the Earth Europe has shown that Europe is dependent on massive amounts of land to maintain the population's high consumption levels.

The current EU push to consume more land, for example by increasing our agrofuels consumption, is increasing the competition between its different potential uses, driving deforestation and habitat destruction as well as fuelling land grabbing and the displacement of communities.

**In a planet with a limited amount of land, can we maintain our current levels of consumption? What steps should the EU take to manage its land footprint?**

### Europe is using too much land

Previous research has estimated Europe's land footprint to be 640 million hectares a year – an area equivalent to 1.5 times the size of Europe itself<sup>3</sup>.

Europe is one of the most intensively used continents on the globe, with the highest share (up to 80%) of land used for settlement, production systems (including agriculture and

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<sup>1</sup> SERI (2013) *Land footprints scenarios* [www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/news/seri\\_land\\_footprint\\_scenario\\_nov2013.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/news/seri_land_footprint_scenario_nov2013.pdf)

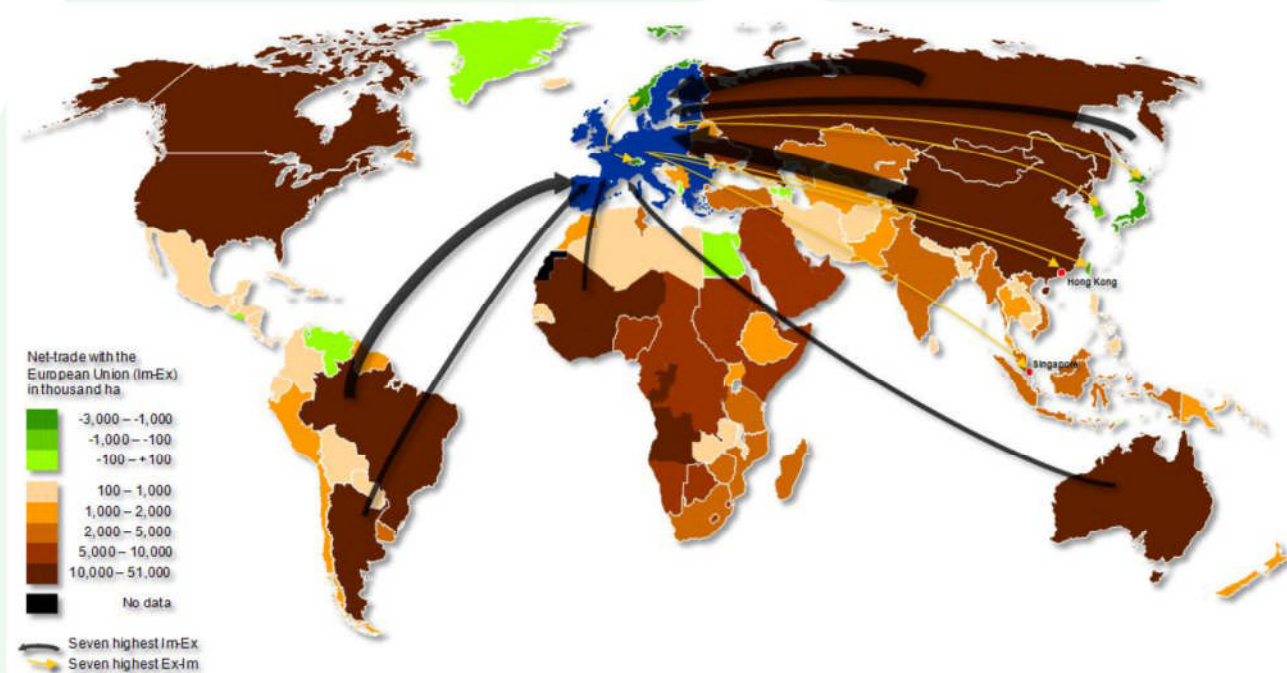
<sup>2</sup> Alongside targets for materials, carbon and water, page 21  
[http://ec.europa.eu/environment/resource\\_efficiency/about/roadmap/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/resource_efficiency/about/roadmap/index_en.htm)

<sup>3</sup> SERI (2011) *Europe's Global Land Demand*  
[http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/publications/Europe\\_Global\\_Land\\_Demand\\_Oct11%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/publications/Europe_Global_Land_Demand_Oct11%5B1%5D.pdf)

commercial forests) and infrastructure<sup>4</sup>. It is also the continent most dependent on imported land to satisfy its high consumption levels. In 2004, 58% of land consumed was from outside Europe – mainly China, the Russian Federation, Brazil and Argentina.

In addition we are currently seeing a push to use more land within Europe. For example, certain policies have driven an increasing demand for bio-based energy sources such as biofuels and biomass, without proper consideration of the effects this has on Europe's land footprint.

Figure 1: Trade balance of virtual land for the EU27



Source: SERI (2011) Europe's global land demand

## What is land footprint?

'Land footprint', or actual land demand, is a method for assessing the total domestic and foreign land required to satisfy the final consumption of goods and services. It is a powerful method of illustrating the dependency of countries or world regions on foreign land, which is embodied in imports and exports (also called 'virtual land').

Land footprint by itself provides useful information, but it is far more powerful when combined with the other indicators such as material, carbon and water footprints in order to identify true resource efficiency, and trade-offs and potential synergies across the various categories of natural resource use.

<sup>4</sup> SERI (2013) *Land footprints scenarios* [www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/news/seri\\_land\\_footprint\\_scenario\\_nov2013.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/news/seri_land_footprint_scenario_nov2013.pdf)

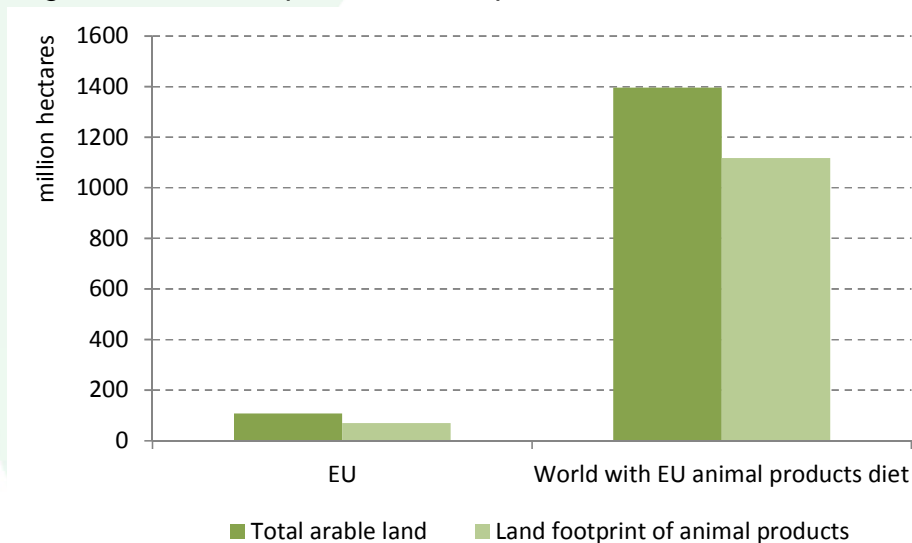
## Inequality

On a per capita basis, the EU average land consumption is 1.3 hectares per capita, while countries such as China and India use less than 0.4 hectares per capita. Every year, the average EU citizen consumes six times more land than the average Bangladeshi.

Global inequalities in land use lead directly to inequalities in health and quality of life. These inequalities cannot be reduced without addressing the fact that a small amount of population, usually located in developed countries, consumes more than its fair share.

For example, if everybody in the world was to consume as much meat as the average European, we would need to use 80% of arable land just for meat production. Research by SERI for Friends of the Earth Europe has estimated that if Europeans cut the amount of meat they eat by 50% this would save 44,058 million hectares, an area equivalent to 1.2 times the size of Germany.

Figure 2: Land footprint of animal products in relation to total arable land in 2011



Source: FAO Database (total arable land), SERI calculations (footprint)

Given that business as usual is not an option, a strategy of reducing global land use therefore needs to fully address the distributional aspects, both between different countries and regions, but also within countries. Ultimately, the objective is to ensure a high quality of life for all people while keeping resource use within the limits of our planet.

## How can we reduce our land footprint?

The current level of land use is not sustainable. Reducing Europe's land consumption should go hand in hand with a stronger focus on wellbeing and with addressing distributional aspects of resource use.

What the EU should do:

- Start an urgent process to set targets to reduce Europe's land footprint. It is clear that Europe's land footprint must come down. It should be possible to have a target in place in 2014 which can help ensure the EU actively pursues the right policies to reduce its land footprint. This will make the EU economy more resilient and will lessen Europe's impacts on the rest of the world.
- Standardise the land footprint methodology, generate the data needed to support it and make EU Member States report their land footprint annually. The results of the land footprint should be published alongside the material, water and carbon footprints.
- Use land footprint in EU and Member State impact assessments to enable the creation of policies that reduce land footprint, and to prevent any increase in Europe's land footprint – this is particularly relevant for policies on the bioeconomy, biomass burning and agrofuels.
- Support EU businesses and supply chains by providing them with clear methodologies and guidance for calculating the land footprint (and material, water and carbon footprints) of their products.

Friends of the Earth Europe gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from DG Environment. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Friends of the Earth Europe and cannot be regarded as reflecting the position of the funder mentioned above. The funder cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information this document contains.



The project was supported by:



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