

EUROPEAN LAND IMPORTS

CONSUMING MORE THAN OUR FAIR SHARE

When we consume products, we are using land – and that land may well be in another country. Our consumption patterns have big effects on the economy, society and ecology of the producing areas.

Everything we consume or use takes land to produce. We can calculate the area required to produce each item. Add up the total, and it is possible to calculate our “land footprint” – the amount of land needed to support our lifestyle. We can go one step further, and calculate how much of this “virtual land” is traded between regions and countries when food and other goods are shipped from one place to another.

Europe is the continent that is most dependent on land located outside its borders. The European Union’s land footprint is an estimated 640 million hectares a year, an area 1.5 times the size of its 28 member countries. This land is located in other parts of the world, including China, Mongolia, Russia, Brazil and other countries, some of which cannot provide basic food needs and resources for their own citizens.

The land footprint figures currently available do not include many key imported materials such as cotton, minerals and metals. If they were included, the EU’s land footprint would probably be even higher. Six of the top 10 land-importing countries are located in Europe: Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, France, the Netherlands and Spain, with

Germany and the UK each importing almost 80 million hectares a year.

Each citizen of the EU consumes on average 1.3 hectares of land per year, six times more than the average Bangladeshi. Inequalities like these cannot be reduced without addressing the fact that a small proportion of the global population, mostly located in developed countries, consumes more than its fair share. If everybody in the world were to consume as much meat as the average European, we would need 80 percent of the current worldwide arable land just to produce meat. On the other hand, halving the EU’s consumption of all types of animal products would cut its footprint by 35 million hectares of arable land and 9 million hectares of grassland.

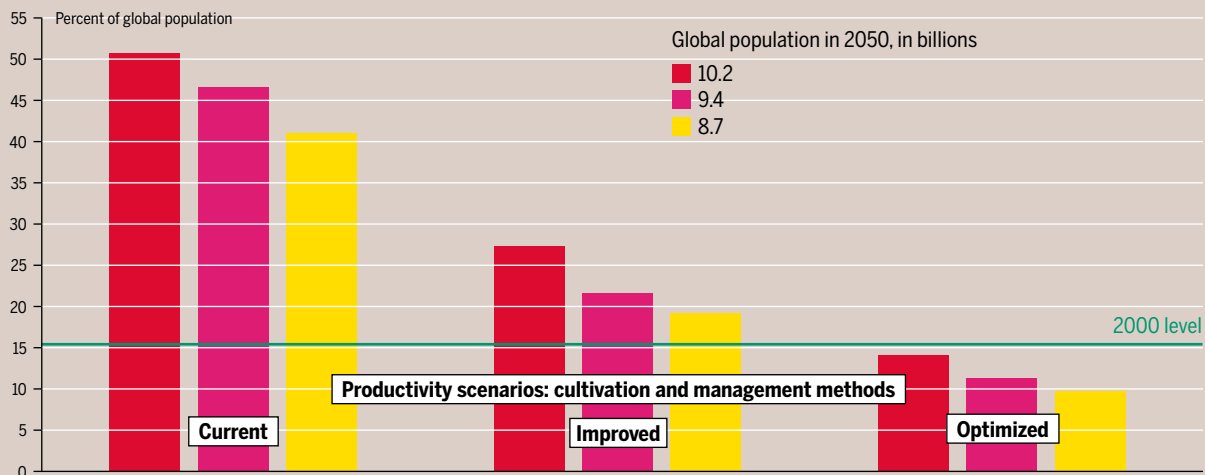
Europe’s enormous demand for land has negative environmental, social and economic effects elsewhere. In the developing world, it is a major cause of ecosystem degradation, large-scale land acquisitions – “land grabbing” – the displacement of communities, and poor working conditions.

Instead of tackling this situation, the EU is consuming even more land, increasing its dependence on land imports, and multiplying its negative environmental and social effects. For example, the switch to biofuels ignores the effects on Europe’s land footprint. Recent research has shown that

Better farming methods and less cultivation for export would reduce the global “land footprint”

DEPENDENCE ON LAND IMPORTS FROM ABROAD

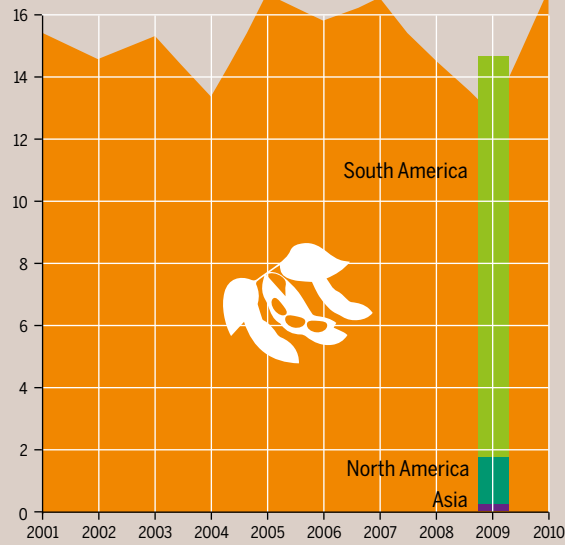
Global population in need of land imports in 2050, in percent, for different population and productivity scenarios



SOIL ATLAS 2015 / FADER U.A.

FODDER FOR EUROPE'S LIVESTOCK

Land used for soy imports to the EU, millions of hectares and main source regions, 2008–2010



SOIL ATLAS 2015 / WWF

In Latin America, an area the size of England is devoted to growing fodder for animals eaten in the EU

Palm oil, used as a food ingredient, is another example. The virtual area imported has more than doubled since 2000, from 1 to 2 million hectares – though the virtual area for oilseed rape, another vegetable oil, has tripled to nearly 3 million hectares during the same period. Production has particularly damaging environmental and social effects in Indonesia and Malaysia, the biggest palm oil producers. These countries are biodiversity hotspots and have insecure land rights. Establishing new plantations often means clearing forests and displacing small-scale farmers and indigenous people.

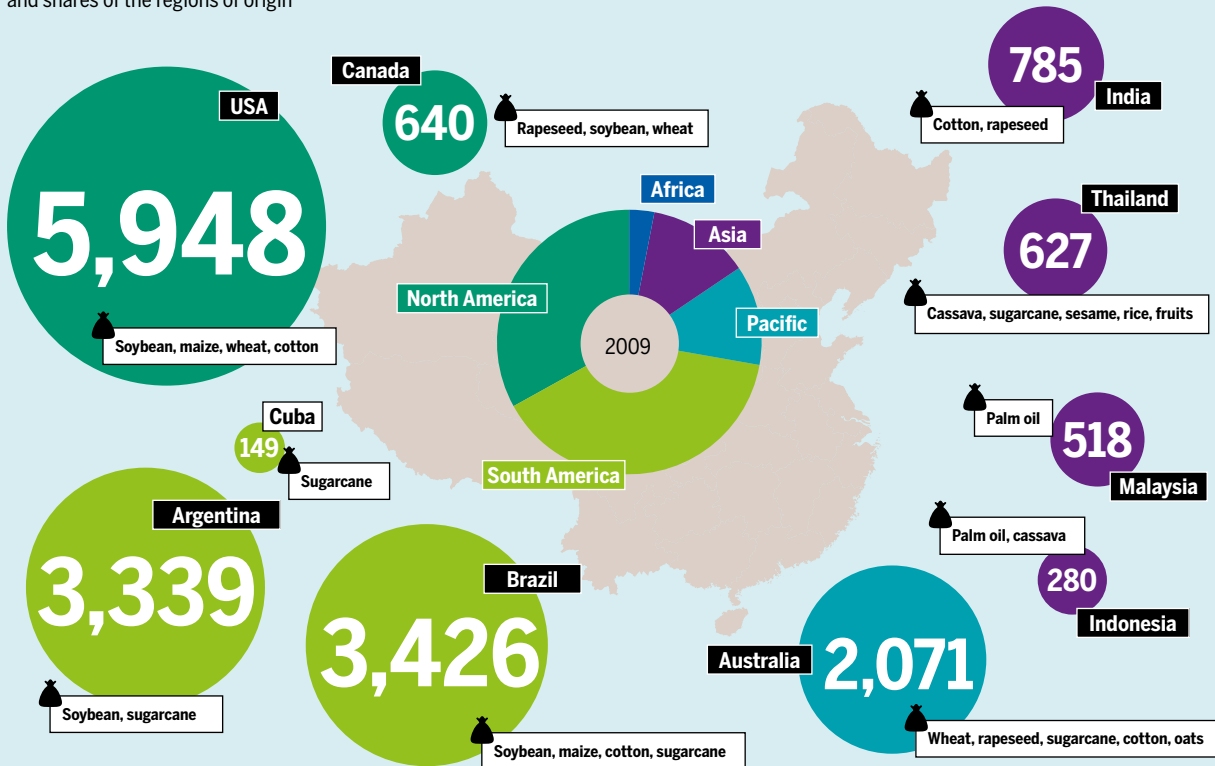
Europeans consume more than their fair share of the Earth's land. The International Resources Panel, a group of experts convened by the United Nations Environment Programme, has calculated how much cropland we would need if we shared it equally. The answer is 0.2 hectares per person per year – less than one-third the size of a football pitch, and less than one-sixth of the area each European currently consumes. ●

to meet the bioenergy requirements of its 2030 Framework for Climate and Energy, the EU will need an extra 70 million hectares of land, an area larger than France. The emerging markets for bio-based materials such as bio-plastics and bio-based chemicals will only accentuate this problem.

The EU is especially dependent on land imports, but China is growing fast – and it buys mainly from the United States

CHINA'S LAND IMPORTS

Imports of field crops by cultivation area, 1,000 hectares, average values 1999–2009, and shares of the regions of origin



SOIL ATLAS 2015 / QIANG ET AL.