



CEJA Young Farmers

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Let's shed a light on the cases of agricultural land take across Europe. Share your testimony with us and follow the campaign [#landstories](#) on Instagram and Twitter.

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Background Brief on CEJA #LandStories campaign

EU Soil Health Law: an opportunity to fight for land preservation

European Council of Young Farmers | June 2023

Land take – what is at stake?

Land take refers to the process of converting agricultural land into areas that are sealed off by construction and urban infrastructure. This conversion is primarily driven by the expansion of housing, services and recreational facilities, as well as the establishment of industrial and commercial sites, transport networks and infrastructure, mines, quarries, waste dumpsites, and construction sites.

The impact on agricultural land is significant. Between 2000 and 2018, a total of 1.4 million hectares of land were converted in the EU-28¹, which represents a larger surface than the Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of Belgium. This conversion is approximately 11 times greater than the amount of land recultivated during the same period. In 2012, a European Commission Staff Working Document² was already highlighting the situation:

“Between 2000 and 2018, a total of 1.4 million hectares of land were “taken”, which is larger than the Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of Belgium”

“Between 1990 and 2000, detected land take in the EU was around 1 000 km² per year and settlement areas increased by nearly 6 %. From 2000 to 2006, the rate of land take decreased to 920 km² per year, while the total settlement area increased by a further 3 %. This corresponds to an increase of almost 9 % between 1990 and 2006 (from 176 200 to 191 200 km²). Assuming an unabated linear trend, we would convert, within a historically very short time frame of just 100 years, an amount of land comparable to the territory of Hungary”.

This is both a quantitative problem, i.e. preserving a sufficient stock of arable land to produce the food we need, and a qualitative problem, since this process is akin to soil sealing. Covering with impermeable material such as concrete or asphalt is one of the main causes of soil degradation in the EU³.

Overall, the rapid pace of land artificialisation threatens the long-term viability of soils and farms by reducing available agricultural land, degrading soil quality, fragmenting land, compromising ecosystem services, and increasing resource competition. These factors collectively undermine the resilience and sustainability of agricultural systems and pose significant challenges for farmers in the future. What is at stake is the management of an essential, limited and coveted resource.

¹ Source: European Environmental Agency [[online](#)]

² European Commission (2012) Staff Working Document, Guidelines on best practice to limit, mitigate or compensate soil sealing, p. 7 [[online](#)]

³ *Ibid.* p.3 – Forward by former Commissioner for the Environment Janez Potočnik

Implications for young farmers

Long-term investment in **soils quality requires certainty of long-term land availability** for farmers. The already difficult access to land for young farmers is further undermined by the high competition and inflated prices associated with land artificialisation. Uncertain leases and the sudden news that their land will be taken for other purposes add to the uncertainty young farmers face. Efforts and investments made to improve the quality of the soil in a specific land plot can be rendered futile if decision is made to convert it into commercial zones.

This emphasizes the need for legislators concerned with soil quality to recognize that not all hectares of land are equal. The quality of the soil requires dedicated work, effort, financial investment, and above all: preservation of land.

The Flemish government is constructing the Oosterweel Link to complete the ring road around Antwerp. To compensate for the deforestation and clearance of natural areas, the government plans to create a "climate belt" connecting existing natural areas. However, this compensation involves using agricultural land, including potentially house plots. As a result, me and other farmers will be compelled to give up highly productive agricultural land to offset the loss of forests and nature caused by the construction project.

– Pieter, Young Dairy farmer in Belgium

In my area, around 30 hectares are going to be lost for the construction of housing, schools and other infrastructure. All the land has been purchased by the state in the past and now, the farmers that still rent are slowly losing the land as the construction advances. Personally, I lost 10 hectares in this area, leaving me with only 4 hectares. I planned to create a flowering meadow on the isolated 4 hectares of my farm to meet sustainability requirements, but the state agency in charge of the land opposed the idea, fearing that the increase in biodiversity and animal habitats would hinder future urban development.

–Marc, Young Farmer in Luxembourg

*For all challenges and recommendations exposed by CEJA on access to land:
CEJA Policy paper (2023) Access to Land: are we losing the European plot? [[online](#)]*

The Need for EU Action

CEJA underscores the significance of incorporating agricultural land preservation within the forthcoming EU Soil Health Law, in light of the law's objective to "specify the conditions for a healthy soil, determine options for monitoring soil, and lay out rules conducive to sustainable soil use and restoration"⁴. The absence of long-term certainty regarding land cultivation hinders farmers' ability to fully dedicate themselves to the restoration phase required to improve soil quality—a process that unfolds over the long term. It typically takes several years to observe the changes in soil evolution following modifications in farming practices. Consequently, CEJA stresses the vital need to include agricultural land preservation in the legislation, ensuring farmers have the necessary confidence and stability to engage in the long-term endeavour of enhancing soil quality.

⁴ European Commission, "About this initiative", [[online](#)]

CEJA recommends a binding EU objective for the preservation of agricultural land.

The upcoming Soil Health Law must be an occasion to transform the ambition for no net land take by 2050 into a legally binding target. This can be translated into clear rules, such as the priority on buildings and already sealed areas to install solar panels or wind turbines to safeguard land availability and soil quality. When it comes to nature preservation, there should be no downgrading of agricultural land next to protected areas. There is an awareness of the difficulties of calculation, monitoring, compensation systems, and adaptation to certain local contexts, but the fact remains that action is crucial to move forward and overcome those challenges.

More generally and in the context of the subsidiarity principle of the EU law, European young farmers highlight the need for a unified approach in view of the interconnectedness of agricultural land across EU member states, which would enable a coordinated EU action in tackling land take and ensuring sustainable agricultural practices. It is necessary to promote land preservation at all governance levels, so that stricter regulations are implemented on land conversion and urban sprawl.

A campaign to showcase concrete cases

CEJA's campaign #LandStories will showcase on social media some concrete cases of affected young farmers to bolster what can already be seen in the statistics.

The European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) represents the political interests of around two million young farmers from across Europe. Its main objectives are to facilitate the installation of young farmers, to inform and train them as well as act as a forum for communication and dialogue between them.

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