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Land use change threatens European landscapes

Accelerating rates of construction, changing demographics, technological changes, and climate change are key drivers influencing the use of Europe's landscapes. A European Environment Agency (EEA) report says that the continent's land use increasingly sees striking changes and conflicts over land demand which will require reconciling place-based management and macro policies to foster responsible land use.

The EEA report 'Landscapes in transition: an account of 25 years of land cover change in Europe,' takes a closer look at the trends over the last 25 years in land use and their environmental impacts. The dominant trend is the continued and accelerating shift from rural to urban use, influenced mostly by economic activities and urban lifestyle demands – such as high mobility and consumption patterns.

The increased covering up of fertile land with buildings, transport infrastructure and industry offers economic benefits but also highlights the need to maintain Europe's natural and landscape. Pro-active and integrated policies on land planning, agriculture, recreation, tourism, transport, energy and other sectors can limit negative effects. In cities, smart and sustainable solutions for urban development will be needed, the report says. It also highlights that good land management can lead to a wide diversity of land use between rural and urban settings. It can also protect fertile lands for food and biomass production by ensuring effective means to promote soil functions, such as carbon storage and prevent soil erosion. Managing the land resource well is essential for a wider societal transition to sustainability.

Main trends

Expansion of urban areas (roads, rail, industrial parks, housing, commercial zones) continues to consume land with productive soil and to fragment existing landscape structures. Artificial areas increased the most. This is a constant trend since 1990, although the urban expansion in the 2006-2012 period was smaller than in the 2000-2006 period.

Europe's agricultural land continues to decrease at a rate of 1,000 km² per year. The structure and associated biodiversity of traditional rural landscapes in Europe is affected by land take, agricultural intensification and farmland abandonment.

The area of European forests has increased since the 1960s. Today, Europe is one of the most forest-rich regions in the world, with more than 42 % of its land covered by forests. Forest land cover flows indicate an intensification of forest land use. This may lead to declining quality of forest ecosystems.

Source: EEA

Download: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/landscapes-in-transition>