

SURFACE: International Standards and Strategies for the Reduction of Land Consumption

Online Conference 16th November 2020, 10:00 – 12:30

Achieving 'no net land take' in Europe: Are we on the right track?

Short Summary of the Conference

Background

In 2011, the European Commission announced, that “by 2020, EU policies take into account their direct and indirect impact on land use in the EU and globally, and the rate of land take is on track with an aim to achieve no net land take by 2050” (COM (2011) 571). However, how this ‘no net land take’ goal should be reached has remained an open question till today and recent data by the European Environment Agency (EEA) show that rates of land take are still high in the EU. Against this backdrop the research project SURFACE (Standards and Strategies for the Reduction of Land Consumption 2017-2021) focuses on quantitative aspects of soil and land protection in Europe. The SURFACE project is funded by the Germany Federal Environmental Agency (UBA), run at the Helmholtz-Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ by an interdisciplinary team with expertise in economics, legal science and nature conservation and supported by several international experts that are involved via surveys and workshops.

On November 16th, about 150 participants from all over Europe joined this online event to discuss results from the SURFACE project and to contribute their own experiences – both personal and institutional – on how to best tackle land take in the EU.

Opening of the SURFACE online conference

In the opening session, project leader Dr. Christoph Schröter-Schlaack (Helmholtz-Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ) introduced the day’s agenda and summarized the key issues to be discussed during the conference. In particular, the following questions were raised: What are the drivers of land take in Europe and which impacts does land take have on the environment, the economy and the society? What are promising governance approaches to reduce land take in EU member states? Does the inclusion of 'land' as factor to be considered in Environmental Assessments (following the EIA-Directive) make a difference?

Subsequently, welcome addresses were delivered by two outstanding representatives from the political arena. First, Rita Schwarzelühr-Sutter, Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, offered her formal greetings to the virtual audience of the conference. Second, Dr. Florika Fink-Hooijer, General Director of Directorate General Environment presented welcome greetings from the European Commission. Thus, both the European and the national level were represented politically at the conference, highlighting the importance of limiting land take for environmental policy more generally.

Setting the scene: land take in Europe

In the first thematic session, Dr. Eva Ivits from the European Environment Agency (EEA) gave an overview about the drivers of land take as well as its impacts. She showed that land take in the EU increased during the 2000-2018 period but that the rate of increase seems to be slowing down. As

strongest drivers of land take, expansion of industry and commercial sites, diffuse urban expansion and construction were identified. The land forms most impacted are arable land, pastures and mosaic farmland. Moreover, Dr. Ivits shared the EEA's experiences as regards data constraints for measuring land take and possible solutions. Finally, she also touched upon some options to manage land take in line with the 'no net land take' goal: For instance, incentives to discourage urban diffusion while encouraging land re-cultivation promise to reduce habitat fragmentation and soil sealing.

Active break

In this session, all participants were invited to share their experiences on the 'no net land take' issue with respect to three questions: 1) Which knowledge gaps remain most urgent? 2) Which are the most promising policy approaches? 3) Which are best practices and lessons to be learnt from and which are the most severe challenges? Many contributions were made for all three questions. First, the lack of data homogenization and standardization across the EU was repeatedly cited as knowledge-based obstacles for effective communication between Member States. Furthermore, national land take targets and strategies are not yet routinely broken down to the regional and even municipal level. Second, as promising policy approaches, compulsory requirements to compensate lost soil functions due to soil sealing, densification and brownfield regeneration, permanent protection of prime agricultural land from conversion and a commitment to a holistic and resilient understanding of urban life were mentioned. Third, adverse incentives were named as one of the most important challenges towards reducing land take. For instance, a financial compensation scheme for land ownership due to oversupply to zonings increased the 'settlement area' for decades in the Flanders region in Belgium. Overall, participants agreed that non-binding goals for 2050 will not suffice to reduce land take in accordance with the goal.

Insights from Germany, France and Project SURFACE

This session included two inputs of experts from Germany and France. To start with, Dr. Jana Bovet (SURFACE project, formerly Helmholtz-Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ, currently Saxon State Ministry for Energy, Climate Protection, Environment and Agriculture) presented results from the SURFACE project. Dr. Bovet gave an overview about the diverse national concepts of land consumption and land take around the EU – often resulting from slight language differences. Furthermore, she showed how implementation of the amended Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) directive unfolds in the EU member states (and how different conceptions of 'land' affect the implementation of the EIA directive). Subsequently, Prof. Dr. Maylis Desrousseaux (Laboratoire Géomatique et Foncier, Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers - Le CNAM) presented research insights and governance approaches for the case of France. The French concept "soil artificialization" provides an opportunity to take the multifunctionality of soil into account and highlight various environmental impacts from land take. Prof. Desrousseaux pointed out that achieving 'no net land take' until 2050 in France would, amongst other issues, require a proper legal definition of soil and soil protection in environmental law.

Closing of the conference

After a reporting back from the Active Break, the conference concluded with an outlook towards the next and final steps within the SURFACE project. In particular, the SURFACE project intends to invite land take experts and scholars for a second conference in spring 2021 – hopefully in real life. This conference will discuss new results from the SURFACE project (particularly from a qualitative survey currently being

evaluated) and further deepen the EU-wide 'no net land take'-network established throughout the project and during the online conference.