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World Soil Day: More than just dirt under our feet

'Urban soil' named soil of the year

World Soil Day is traditionally on 5 December, which gives the Federal Environment Agency occasion to draw attention to the importance of intact soil: "When compared to the media water and soil, soil is still often trampled under foot. However, man lives on as well as from intact and healthy soils. Fertile soil is a source of raw materials and food, a store of nutrients, water or greenhouse gases, and a habitat. Contaminated sites, the expansion of human settlements, and the global phenomenon of desertification have increasingly jeopardised the role played by soil. Efficient soil protection is a matter of common sense", said UBA President Jochen Flasbarth. Although the importance of our soils has drawn more public attention in the past ten years due to a variety of campaigns run by the Federal and *Laender* governments, there is still much to be done. The soil of the year happens to be urban soil, so as to focus attention on the soil right under our feet. Urban soils are of utmost importance for the water table and the climate, although they are sometimes exposed to higher levels of pollution.

To mark the tenth anniversary of German soil protection legislation the German Federal Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) and the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) invited members of associations of local authorities and professional soil associations to a congress held in Berlin on 3 December 2009. In the two days before World Soil Day policy makers and experts from both science and the field held talks on success stories in soil protection, problems encountered, and new national and international challenges to be faced.

The group of experts agreed that the urgency of effective soil protection is also a result of the fact that soil does not reproduce and can only be renewed to a very limited degree. Any damages done can either not be repaired at all or only at considerable cost. "Especially in light of the possible changes in the climate, quick action is called for. Whereas desertification is on the rise around the globe as a result of climate change, agriculture in certain regions of Germany can actually benefit from these changes. Less soil will have to feed more people, however, and this is also why we must protect our fertile soils", said UBA's President Jochen Flasbarth.

The Soil Protection Commission (KBU) at the Federal Environment Agency also advised the Federal and *Laender* governments to slow down land consumption. Experts have proposed

initating trade in land area allocations in a publication titled Flächenverbrauch vermindern - jetzt handeln [Reduce land consumption - act now]. Similarly to emissions trading, they propose imposing caps on new land take and introducing the option to buy and sell unused land areas. "At present we are consuming new land area at a daily rate of 104 hectares—which is far removed from the Federal government goal of reducing this to 30 hectares by 2020. We could make it if we implement our scheme", says Prof. Franz Makeschin, KBU Chairman.

The recommendations of the Soil Protection Commission at the Federal Environment Agency can be downloaded here: <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/boden-und-altlasten/kbu/index.htm>. The Flächenverbrauch vermindern - jetzt handeln publication will also be available from that address soon.

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