

Press Release No. 37/2008

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Setting limits for asphalt and cement

Put the brakes on land use, save resources, maintain diversity

Nearly 113 hectares of land are consumed daily for new developments in Germany—whether for homes, commercial space, rest and recreation, or transport. That is equivalent to almost 160 football pitches per day—despite the fact that the population in Germany continues to decline and there are developed areas no longer in use whose size is as large as the area of Lake Constance (ca.180,000 hectares). According to statistics, every German citizen lays claim to 564 square metres of space, and that figure is on the rise.

“In Europe urban sprawl is one of the main causes of loss of species. The high level of land consumption and intensive land use rob the habitats of animals and plants”, said Dr. Thomas Holzmann, Vice President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), at a podium discussion held as part of the 9th UN Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Bonn. “Whilst we spread ourselves out nature is being slowly edged out”, said Holzmann. A new UBA flyer with concise information for municipalities, businesses and citizens shows how to curb land consumption.

Progressive municipalities are those that consider forecasts on the ageing population in their construction plans and actually limit designation of new construction zones to demand for it. Remediation and revaluation of existing housing stock should take priority over new construction, in keeping with the motto “Back to city centres, stay away from greenfield areas”, as Holzmann said in Bonn. “The model for the future in an ageing society with an ever sinking population is one of efficient living in compact settlement areas”, said Holzmann. When home, workplace and leisure time space are far apart, it costs time, money, energy, and resources. Technical and social infrastructure become more expensive, in part as a result of the need for more extensive power lines and sewage pipes. Traffic and all its negative effects—noise, the production of air pollutants such as particulate matter or carbon dioxide— increase as we expand settlements laterally.

The destruction and partitioning of habitats is one of the greatest problems posed to maintaining biodiversity. The spaces to which animals and plants can retreat are becoming fewer and smaller due to human demand for land. Moreover, roads, railroad tracks and town demarcations separate habitats from one another, thereby isolating plant and animal populations. The migration paths of larger animals in particular, f.e. the lynx, otter, puma or

deer, are severely impeded. According to estimates by the Deutsche Jagdschutzverband, a total of 500,000 animals are killed on Germany's roads every year.

Humans, too, suffer from land consumption: once soil is sealed it takes great efforts to reverse it. This ravenous land consumption means that fertile land which is the basis of our livelihoods is lost every day. Sealing of less than 50 percent can already increase the risk of flooding and impedes formation of groundwater. By comparison, one hectare of forest soil can store two million litres of water for a longer period of time, providing flood relief if necessary.

New construction of settlements with declining population figures threatens to result in residential space vacancies, thereby triggering lower property and estate prices.

Municipalities, businesses and private citizens who wish to reduce land consumption in earnest are advised by UBA first and foremost to locate and reactivate brownfield areas. It must become a thing of the past to see the facades of city centre buildings in the process of decay whilst new construction and settlements continue to spring up in greenfield areas. "Compact construction saves infrastructure costs and makes travel between work, home, and leisure activities shorter. The resulting cleaner air, quieter roads and green areas will make for a livable environment which, for an ageing population, is an appealing measure of quality of life", said Holzmann.

The new flyer (German) titled *Grenzen setzen für Asphalt und Beton - Stopp dem Flächenfraß* [Setting limits for asphalt and cement - putting the brakes on land use] is available on the Internet for free at <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/rup/index.htm>.

A background paper on the subject of land consumption is available at <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-presse/hintergrund/flaechen.pdf> (in German).

Dessau-Roßlau, 27 May 2008