

## **Future Farmland Requirements in a Densely Populated Area: The Case of Flanders in Europe**

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In Flanders, as in many regions in Europe, the contribution of agriculture to GDP is limited (about 2%) and declining, even though the sector uses more than 50% of the land (a rather scarce resource in densely populated Flanders). This leads to increasing pressure from society to shift land from farming to other usages. When drawing the new spatial plan aiming at defining land use in Flanders for the next decade, it becomes crucial for the agricultural sector to be able to underpin land claims with hard evidence indicating the future importance of the agri-business sector.

Land can only justifiably be dedicated to agriculture if the sector has some potential to contribute to society. Therefore, our research starts by identifying all different forces driving agriculture (internal as well as external, like resources, social, policy and economic powers). Existing data are used to define a regression on production values of agriculture. Next, these findings were fine tuned by conducting a qualitative research action amongst a set of experts using the SOR methodology (strategic orientation round) through which the expected future evolution of the driving forces is identified. This future evolution highly depends on the general background used to look at the future and therefore three different scenarios are examined. The first one is the global economy scenario where market based solutions are most efficient to achieve strong economic growth. The second scenario, regional communities, depends on self-reliance, environmental stewardship and sustainable development. The third one is called global co-operation, with high regulation and a global focus, and resembles best the current situation in Flanders. For each scenario and each agricultural activity the expected production value for 2013 and 2020 is estimated. Finally, the amount of hectares needed by each activity and by agriculture in total is defined.

Two major results come out of the research. First of all, it becomes clear that agriculture should have at least as much space as is used today if society wants to give the sector full development possibilities. Secondly, the results differ strongly between the three used scenarios. A society demanding more quality of goods, services, landscape or environment stimulates even more land use by agriculture. When a society or policy is more concerned on creating an economically and globally viable region, less land should be dedicated to agriculture.

It's up to policy makers to decide which scenario they intend to follow and their choice can easily be incorporated in the model. By collecting basic data indicating in an unprejudiced way whether it is socially beneficial to maintain agriculture and at what scale, it gives policy makers an instrument to make better underpinned decisions about land use planning.