

UN warns 25 pct of world land highly degraded

November 28 2011, By NICOLE WINFIELD , Associated Press

(AP) -- The United Nations has completed the first-ever global assessment of the state of the planet's land resources, finding in a report Monday that a quarter of all land is highly degraded and warning the trend must be reversed if the world's growing population is to be fed.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that farmers will have to produce 70 percent more food by 2050 to meet the needs of the world's expected 9 billion-strong population. That amounts to 1 billion tons more wheat, rice and other [cereals](#) and 200 million more tons of beef and other livestock.

But as it is, most available land is already being farmed, and in ways that actually decrease its productivity through practices that lead to soil erosion and wasting of water.

That means that to meet the world's future food needs, a major "sustainable intensification" of [agricultural productivity](#) on existing [farmland](#) will be necessary, the FAO said in "State of the World's Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture."

The report was released Monday, as delegates from around the world meet in Durban, South Africa, for a two-week U.N. [climate change conference](#) aimed at breaking the deadlock on how to curb emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

The report found that climate change coupled with poor farming

practices had contributed to a decrease in productivity of the world's farmland following the boon years of the Green Revolution, when [crop yields](#) soared thanks to new technologies, pesticides and the introduction of high-yield crops.

Thanks to the Green Revolution, the world's cropland grew by just 12 percent between 1961 and 2009, but food productivity increased by 150 percent.

But the U.N. report found that rates of growth have been slowing down in many areas and today are only half of what they were at the peak of the [Green Revolution](#).

It found that 25 percent of the world's land is now "highly degraded," with soil erosion, water degradation and biodiversity loss. Another eight percent is moderately degraded, while 36 percent is stable or slightly degraded and 10 percent is ranked as "improving."

The rest of the Earth's surface is either bare or covered by inland water bodies.

Some examples of areas at risk: Western Europe, where highly intensive agriculture has led to pollution of soil and aquifers and a resulting loss of biodiversity; In the highlands of the Himalayas, the Andes, the Ethiopian plateau and southern Africa, [soil erosion](#) has been coupled with an increase intensity of floods; In southeast and eastern Asia's rice-based food systems, land has been abandoned thanks in part to a loss of the cultural value of it.

The report found that water around the world is becoming ever more scarce and salinated, while groundwater is becoming more polluted by agricultural runoff and other toxins.

In order to meet the world's water needs in 2050, more efficient irrigation will necessary since currently most irrigation systems perform well below their capacity, FAO said.

The agency called for new farming practices like integrated irrigation and fish-farm systems to meet those demands, as well as overall investment in agricultural development.

The price tag deemed necessary for investments through 2050: \$1 trillion in irrigation water management alone for developing countries, with another \$160 billion for soil conservation and flood control.

More information: <http://www.fao.org>

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Citation: UN warns 25 pct of world land highly degraded (2011, November 28) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-11-pct-world-highly-degraded.html>

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