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No net land take – under what conditions?

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Every year in France, around 66,000 hectares of natural or agricultural land are transformed into artificial areas (urban, transport and leisure spaces). This process of land take is accompanied by the destruction and weakening of natural habitats, and is one of the causes of the [collapse of biodiversity](#), at the international level and particularly [in France](#). Many stakeholder communities are therefore anticipating government action. It is in this context that the Minister of State Nicolas Hulot announced on Wednesday 4th July that among the 90 measures of the [Biodiversity Plan for France](#) would be the goal of achieving “no net

land take” [1]. Since it is not conceivable to imagine a complete halt of the demand for development, even in the long term, the term “net” implies in this instance that new surfaces must be compensated for by the ecological restoration of land that is today artificial. How feasible is this ambitious goal? What levers can be mobilized for its implementation?

An inevitable use of compensation

The goal of no **net land take** requires as much as possible the avoidance of new losses of agricultural and natural lands, reducing the use of such land in new projects, and compensating for that which will continue to be used through the extension of housing, commercial zones, transport routes, etc. Even in countries with moderate demographic and economic growth, such as France, the demand for space remains high, and we cannot presume that this will be completely halted, even with the best urbanization practices. No “net” land take therefore means that what continues to be lost will be offset by gains elsewhere.

Land take compensation is practiced today in a number of cases: if a developer proposes to destroy protected spaces or species, the authorities impose conditions on the developer obliging him or her to compile a document to show they have taken steps to avoid unnecessary land use, that they have minimized their footprint, and to ensure that they propose designated lands that are currently of degraded ecological quality in order to restore them and thus “compensate” for the land that has been destroyed or damaged. Today, such examples are rare. The procedure, reaffirmed by the [Act of 8 August 2016](#) on the restoration of biodiversity, incurs a high cost in terms of administrative work, technical studies and significant delays [2]. In reality it is usually only implemented for “major projects”, particularly railway lines, major road and port projects, etc.

Above all, however, land take results from the eating away of territory by the [building of individual houses and business parks](#). It is the result of a myriad of small-size projects – starting with houses built as “dispersed” settlements by individuals. Limiting their use of space will therefore involve a change of rationale, and a deep rethinking in the ways in which we develop housing and business areas to make them less wasteful in terms of space; which falls beyond the scope of a few decrees or regulatory clauses. It will inevitably be necessary to apply a rationale of compensation, which is at least partially within the power of the authorities.

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Under what conditions is it possible to extend compensation?

- It is therefore necessary to **compensate a proportion of what consumes, on a daily basis, the most agricultural and natural land**: a multitude of projects of all sizes, from the smallest housing estates to the creation of commercial and business parks, and warehouses situated near motorway interchanges, etc. In the absence of a significant strengthening of the administration's processing capacities, compensating for this use of space would require a combination of the preventive implementation of compensation when designing future urban planning projects (PLU and SCOT), a significant modification of the current procedures, and the outsourcing of some tasks to the private sector. All this at a time when current compensation practices are being strongly criticized for their ecological shortcomings. Such changes are of course risky but compared to the current situation it is likely that they would represent an improvement.
- Moreover, **compensating for land take means finding one of the rarest and most coveted resources in regions where urbanization is increasing**: vacant land. This difficulty was experienced a few years ago by the Yvelines department in the establishment of such a reserve of agricultural land (of about one hundred hectares, i.e. the size of an average farm), which testifies to the limited leeway of land use. The government's objective also includes returning artificial land back to nature, since a reduction of agricultural land is not the aim. There are [some examples of this](#) being carried out, for instance [in former industrial areas](#), but these operations are rare, costly, and currently mobilize public as well as private money. Implementing large-scale land restoration therefore involves the identification of suitable land and considerable discussions on the distribution of financial effort.
- Finally, the setting of long-term goals must be accompanied by the allocation of sufficient means. Today, no database is able to measure the evolution of land use on the French national scale in a sufficiently precise manner, as was done for Île-de-France by the [Regional Institute for Planning and Development](#).

Rethinking and better managing planning

These few thoughts highlight the fact that the “**no net land take**” objective appears so ambitious that it should be considered as a guiding principle, a reference and a perspective for action. How, then, can we ensure that it does not remain a dead letter?

It should be underlined that **compensation** must only be made after we have minimized land wastage. We think that one of the ways to achieve this is for actors involved in regulation and biodiversity to enter into discussions and negotiations (reinforced by the aims of the biodiversity plan) with those of the property developers. In particular, companies and authorities involved in the planning of business and commercial zones could find common interest in slowing down their continued expansion. Recently, they have expressed concern about an oversupply of areas in relation to demand, and too much competition between business and retail areas. Giving consideration to a slowdown in the growth of commercial and business areas, the expansion of which now exceeds economic growth, could be of interest to both economic and biodiversity stakeholders.

It should also be noted that a quarter of the areas within business and commercial zones are lawns and other types of unsealed land. However, these areas, which represent thousands of hectares (for example there were about 10,000 hectares of lawns in Ile-de-France in 2012), are currently managed poorly in terms of biodiversity: lawns are cut very short, trees are selected and planted without reference to local ecology, etc. Improvement in the management of these areas could be proposed which would thus meet the growing demand of residents, customers and employees of these areas for an improvement of their landscapes in terms of variety, aesthetics and biodiversity.

Finally, it will probably be difficult to constrain the development of housing estates, since they are very popular in France today. But at least it should be possible to influence the urban design of these estates (in northern European countries, for example, semi-collective housing is considered less space-consuming). Similarly, there could be a strengthening of the ecological quality of the areas in between these buildings (lawns, gardens, abandoned roads...), which are, once again, quite important and probably underestimated.

Thus, if it becomes a direction and objective that is firmly held by the government, relayed by political and regulatory means, the “no net land take” objective has the potential to modify the terms of the discussions and negotiations with land planning actors, and there are ways to get these negotiations underway.

[1] In 2011, the European Union announced the goal of “No net land take” by 2050 to preserve soil resources ([COM \(2011\) 571: Roadmap to a resource efficient Europe, 20.09. 2011](#)).

France is the first European country to make a similar commitment (albeit with no time horizon currently being set), while other countries have set reduction targets

[2] See on this subject Colsaet, A. 2017. [Gérer l'artificialisation des sols : une analyse du point de vue de la biodiversité](#). Report, Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), Paris, France

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