



Sociological Approaches to the Environment

Lesson: Reading

Article: Global agricultural economic water scarcity

Published in *Science Advances*

April 29, 2020

<https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaz6031>

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Abstract:

Water scarcity raises major concerns on the sustainable future of humanity and their conservation of important ecosystem functions. To meet the increasing food demand without expanding cultivated areas, agriculture will likely need to introduce irrigation in croplands that are currently rain-fed but where enough water would be available for irrigation. "Agricultural economic water scarcity" is, here, defined as lack of irrigation due to limited institutional and economic capacity instead of hydrologic constraints. To date, the location and productivity potential of economically water scarce croplands remain unknown. We develop a monthly agrohydrological analysis to map agricultural regions affected by agricultural economic water scarcity. We find these regions account for up to 25% of the global croplands, mostly across Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Sustainable irrigation of economically water scarce croplands could feed an additional 840 million people while preventing further aggravation of blue water scarcity.

Conclusions:

With continuing growth in food demand and limited potential for cropland expansion, sustainable irrigation becomes an increasingly important strategy to ensure a reliable and resilient global supply of food in a changing climate. This study maps global agricultural economic water scarcity (EWS) at unprecedented spatial and temporal resolution. We determine agricultural economic water scarce lands where investments in sustainable irrigation have the possibility to increase food production by

expanding irrigation over currently rain-fed croplands. We find that 22% global calorie production happens under conditions of blue water scarcity (BWS). While irrigation currently consumes $1083 \text{ km}^3 \text{ year}^{-1}$ of blue water resources, we estimate that only $810 \text{ km}^3 \text{ year}^{-1}$ of blue water resources can be consumed sustainably by the global croplands. We estimate that cultivated lands affected by agricultural EWS account for 15 to 25% of the global croplands and could be irrigated sustainably contributing to future