



Tropentag, September 18-21, 2016, Vienna, Austria

“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Land Use Change and Intensification, and Family Farmers in Uruguay: The Crop/Cattle Dilemma

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Abstract

The land use change process occurred in Uruguay between the years 2000 and 2013 has had a profound impact in the country. In this period, soybean and forest crops have increased by 100,000 and 40,000 ha per year, respectively. Changes in farming structure and access to resources between 2000 and 2010 endangered the livelihood of 57 % of family farmers in Uruguay; most of them cattle keepers on native grasslands, and 25 % of them have abandoned the activity in the last 10 years. This has been fuelled by low productivity and incomes, higher cost of access to land, insecure land tenure and the loss of 2 million ha from local farmers to anonymous societies (mostly foreign companies). Soybean has advanced mostly in areas of mix farming where sown pastures and crops coexisted for more than 30 years, shifting from crop-livestock systems into continuous cropping, increasing the risk of soil erosion and the vulnerability of the farming systems to market and climate variability. Parallel to crop and forest expansion, livestock systems have intensified through the use of external feedstuffs, whose imports have steadily grown in the last 10 years. This process is linked with the growth in number and size of feedlots, associated with risks of water eutrophication, higher use of fossil fuels and pesticide contamination. Research has shown that livestock productivity can be improved on native grasslands without increasing costs, resulting on 30–40 % increase in family income. Such promising models of meat production on native grasslands can improve the conservation of the highly species-rich grasslands along with benefits in terms of climate change mitigation, soil conservation and nutrient cycling.

Keywords: Ecosystem services, family farming, livestock