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Farming practices must change to increase production and protect the environment

Water limits are close to being 'reached or breached' in many breadbaskets across the world, threatening to decimate global supplies of fresh water and cripple agricultural systems, new research has claimed. Therefore, to boost food production and protect the environment, the way farming and natural systems interact must change radically and quickly. Given that agriculture already accounts for 70-90 per cent of water withdrawals in some areas, a report from the [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#) and the UNs Environment Programme (UNEP) has called for a radical change in farming practices.

"Blanket prohibitions against cultivation do not always reduce ecosystem destruction and can make things worse," explains Matthew McCarthy from [IWMI](#). "For example, the grassy 'dambo' wetlands of sub-Saharan Africa often provide vital farmland to the rural poor. Banning farming in these areas, however, has exacerbated rather than reduced ecosystem destruction." He adds, "What is needed is a balance: appropriate farming practices that support sustainable food production and protect ecosystems."

From using trees on dryland farms to increase food production, whilst preventing runoff and soil erosion, to providing farmers with incentives to adopt improved practices, the authors cite several successful examples of an 'agroecosystem' approach, where farming helps to maintain and supplement clean water, air and protect biodiversity. "More and more agriculture needs to be brought into the 'green economy'," explains Alain Vidal from CGIAR's Challenge Program on Water and Food. "We need to value farming practices that protect our precious water resources in the same way we are beginning to value forest management that helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions, especially because those natural resources support the livelihoods of the most vulnerable."

"It is essential that in the future we do things differently. There is a need for a seminal shift in the way modern societies view water and ecosystems and the way we interact with them," adds David Molden, IWMI deputy director general for research. "Managing water for food and ecosystems will bring great benefits, but there is no escaping the urgency of this situation. We are heading for disaster if we don't change our practices from 'business-as-usual'."

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