

Food and Agriculture Organization has estimated that China's total available cropland declined from 105.2 million hectares in 1961 to 96.6 in 1990.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, there are significant uncertainties, largely due to incentives for farmers and local officials to understate cultivated areas, surrounding these numbers, and they could be understated by as much as 30 percent.<sup>62</sup>

Yet the trend is fairly clear. Beijing officials accept that the official statistics on total cultivated area are understated, but argue that "since there is no overwhelming reason to assume that the overall extent of inaccuracy has changed significantly during the last 30 years, the trends are not affected by this problem".<sup>63</sup> The Chinese Academy of Sciences has estimated that the net cultivated area is declining by 333,000 hectares per year.<sup>64</sup> The State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission estimate that arable land is being reduced at a rate of 200-300,000 hectares per year.<sup>65</sup> While the precise extent of decline is uncertain, there is little doubt that China is experiencing a continuous loss of cultivated area.

The trend of net cultivated area loss needs to be interpreted cautiously. Does a loss in cultivated area translate into less production? The answer to this is: not necessarily. Since the 1961 FAO base mentioned above, Chinese agricultural production has increased. The growth in Chinese production has been brought about by changes in productivity, which in turn arose from a combination of technological and policy changes. Yet we should register reservations on the optimistic forecast made by Chinese scientists.<sup>66</sup> A three year study co-sponsored by the Development and Research Center of the State Council, the Ministry of Agriculture and the State Science and Technology Commission:

---

<sup>61</sup>World Resources Institute, World Resources 1994-95, p.71.

<sup>62</sup>Vaclav Smil, China's Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993, p. 55.

<sup>63</sup>ibid., p. 55.

<sup>64</sup>World Resources Institute, World Resources 1994-95, p.71.

<sup>65</sup>State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission. "Priority Programme for China's Agenda 21", p.2-1-1

<sup>66</sup>The Ministry of Agriculture also insists that the long-run prospect for securing grain self-sufficiency in China remains favourable. The China Quarterly, Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation, 1995, p. 929.