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Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection

European Parliament resolution on the Commission communication ‘Towards a Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection’ (COM(2002) 179 – C5-0328/2002 – 2002/2172(COS))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Commission communication (COM(2002) 179),
 - having regard to Decision No 1600/2002/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 July 2002 laying down the Sixth Community Environment Action Programme¹,
 - having regard to the provisions laid down in Directives 92/43/EEC² (Habitats), 79/409/EEC³ (Birds), 85/337/EEC⁴ (Environmental Impact Assessment) and 2000/60/EC⁵ (the Water Framework Directive) as regards the protection of ecosystems and their direct link with soil protection,
 - having regard to Rule 47(2) of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy and the opinions of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee on Regional Policy, Transport and Tourism (A5-0354/2003),
- A. whereas soil is a key component of the earth’s environment, is the interface between the hydrosphere, atmosphere and organisms inhabiting it, regulates natural material and energy cycles and is extremely sensitive to the effects of climate change and to human and historical activities, with the result that its structure and characteristics are the product of an age-old process, making it a non-renewable resource,
- B. whereas soil provides the basis for human settlements, their economic activities and infrastructures, and there is consequently an urgent need to regulate its uses and assess and mitigate the impact of external actions,
- C. whereas, nevertheless, certain farming and forestry activities (conservation of terraces, controlled grazing in certain areas, the creation of crop mosaics) have been key factors in conserving soil as a resource and, consequently, abandoning these practices has given rise to significant problems of soil loss,

¹ OJ L 242, 10.9.2002, p. 1.

² OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.

³ OJ L 103, 25.4.1979, p. 1.

⁴ OJ L 175, 5.7.1985, p. 40.

⁵ OJ L 327, 22.12.2000, p. 1.

- D. whereas the methodology of this thematic strategy must consider the cause-effect relationship, human or climatic impacts, the main causes of soil degradation and loss, contamination, acid rain, desertification and salinisation, sealing and compaction, floods and landslides, so as to propose a series of interlinking measures geared to promoting effective soil management,
- E. whereas excessively concentrated urbanisation and infrastructure construction, which do not always respect the environment, have boosted the consumption of natural soil, generated large compact areas which weaken citizens' relationship with the natural surroundings, fragmented land, changed water courses and increased the risks of floods, and whereas this process is becoming particularly unsustainable in many European coastal areas,
- F. whereas a reduction in the use of pesticides, as well as a phase-out of the use of certain dangerous substances in pesticides, is necessary to minimise the problems relating to the quality of agricultural soils,
- G. whereas the priorities for soil policy must include the decline in biodiversity, the processes of physical and chemical degradation triggered by erosion, desertification, pollution and the decline in organic matter,
- H. whereas there is a wide diversity of soil problems among and within the Member States and candidate countries, and soil pollution is much less of a cross-border problem than air or water pollution; whereas the added value of European action lies principally in the exchange of information, know-how and best practice,
- I. whereas soil protection is a precondition for achieving, inter alia, the objectives of Directive 2000/60/EC as regards preventing diffuse pollution, Directive 92/43/EEC as regards soil biodiversity and the Kyoto Protocol as regards the capacity of the soil and subsoil to retain CO₂,
- J. whereas it is necessary to consider the causes of the process of soil degradation taking account of the specific features of each European region and, in particular, the problems linked to Mediterranean soils seriously affected by phenomena such as forest fires or desertification,
1. Calls on the Commission to present, by July 2004, the thematic strategy for soil protection which should be based on the strengthening of current policies and, through an integrated approach, should define problems, qualitative and quantitative objectives and the means by which they can be achieved, timetables and general principles for evaluation and monitoring geared to the following:
- putting an end to the accumulation in soil of substances which pose an environmental and health hazard;
 - reversing the alarming trend towards erosion, compaction and sealing, the removal and contamination of soil;
 - protecting soil in its role in storing CO₂, securing water resources and preserving biodiversity;

- protecting soil for the sustainable production of food and renewable resources;
- 2. Urges the Commission to draw up by 2007, in cooperation with the Member States and the competent regional authorities, a scientific soil catalogue which should include the nature of the soil, its biography, health and vulnerability, degradation and erosion processes and contaminated areas, recognising the existence of high-value soils (in terms of agriculture, geology, ecology, history or the countryside) and the need to draw up recommendations for their conservation and sustainable use; stresses the importance of harmonising analytical methods to obtain comparable soil data; considers that the accessibility of existing information must also be improved, given that this is an important prerequisite for the necessary exchange of information and experience between Member States;
- 3. Calls on the Commission, in this context, to establish, when the scientific soil catalogue is drawn up, a link between soil protection and soil use, since any scientific and taxonomic classification of soil, although of great interest, would be less effective without the creation of mechanisms for the constant surveillance of soil use (monitoring increases in irrigation, reclassification of protected areas, urban development on wetlands, construction of infrastructure on fertile soil, etc.); considers that, taking account of the subsidiarity principle, such use-surveillance mechanisms should be implemented in close collaboration with the Member States;
- 4. Calls on the Commission to draw up guidelines, addressed to the Member States and the competent regional authorities, for preventing, monitoring and controlling soil pollution;
- 5. Supports the Commission in collating and perfecting the existing databases and completing the maps in order to obtain a georeferenced system; approves, likewise, the creation of a digital geographic information system which would gather the currently fragmented information at appropriate levels and which would be accessible to the public;
- 6. Calls on the Commission, in line with the SOVEUR report¹, to carry out an audit to provide a methodical assessment and mapping of European soil, taking into account the need for a specific approach based on three main principles: precaution, anticipation and prevention; believes that these principles, in the spirit of the FAO World Soil Charter, should be designed to prevent soil erosion and desertification;
- 7. Proposes to the Commission, once the catalogues and diagnoses have been completed, that European soils be zonified, taking account of geographic, climatic and typological heterogeneity, including uses and risks and its proposals for feasible monitoring at the appropriate levels;
- 8. Calls on the Commission to study the possibility of adopting a system of specific soil indicators which will make it possible to trace the development of the state of soil in line with the steps taken, starting with an initial diagnosis; points out, in this connection, that there are already systems proposed by the European Environment Agency and the OECD (pressure-state-response system) which could be adopted in the thematic strategy;

¹ Van Lynden , G.W., 2000. Soil degradation in Central and Eastern Europe: The assessment of the status of human-induced soil degradation. FAO-ISRIC, Rome.

9. Considers it necessary for soil protection to be better integrated into Community policies, in particular, soil protection should be taken into account in the context of the common agricultural policy (CAP), on (regional) infrastructure projects co-financed by the European Union both in connection with the Trans-European Networks, and when granting support from the Structural and Cohesion Funds and pre-accession aid;
10. Calls on the Commission to make cross compliance compulsory for all payments under the CAP, ensuring that all relevant aspects of soil protection are covered in the definition of 'good agricultural and environmental condition', including mandatory soil management plans, providing free impartial data and advice to all farmers, in both arable and pastoral systems;
11. Supports the Commission's initiative to draw up a legislative proposal, the nature of which should be determined in the thematic strategies, on the creation of a system for monitoring soil and possible compaction;
12. Calls on the Commission to review existing legislation with a view to the improved integration of soil protection and, through supplementary proposals, to ensure that greater account is taken of soil protection in the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive;
13. Calls on the Commission to take account, in the legislative initiatives which will ensue from its thematic strategy, of the role played by agriculture in revitalising soil and the importance of maintaining farming activity, above all in regions facing the greatest risk of depopulation; believes that suitable soil uses in agriculture, grassland or woodland are basic factors in soil preservation;
14. Considers it necessary to establish a formal definition of models of agriculture and types of crops which coexist in the EU (sustainable organic farming with minimum tillage, dry farming, farming on irrigated land, pastureland, farming without land, and mountain or dry pastures) and their different effects on soil, so that environmental measures are diversified in line with the characteristics of farming and its benefits for the soil;
15. Calls on the Commission to provide an incentive, through the CAP's environmental flanking programmes, for practices geared towards soil conservation and to promote, through suitable EAGGF support, the crops and uses which are most appropriate to the soil characteristics and the economic and social context; stresses, in this connection, the role which legumes might play in preserving vegetal cover and the wealth of fauna in certain regions, since the capacity of these crops to hold nitrogen makes it possible to use fewer fertilisers;
16. Calls on the Commission to prepare a localised diagnosis of the impact of CAP reform on soil health, which should include rural depopulation (and its socio-economic and environmental consequences), the centralisation of aid and market liberalisation, and calls, likewise, for the environmental measures under the CAP to include measures relating to the protection and conservation of soil and water resources, including specific measures with financial support;

17. Considers it necessary, even though there are saline soils of high intrinsic value, to create the mechanisms required to control salinisation processes and evaluate irrigation schemes which may have an adverse impact on rivers or groundwater flows; recommends, likewise, drawing up guides to good farming practice, strengthening the capacities and responsibility of regional and local administrations;
18. Urges the Commission to revise Directive 86/278/EEC¹ on the use of sewage sludge and draw up a directive on compost; stresses the need to intensify research in this field so as to boost its potential for the recovery of soil lacking in organic matter and bring together waste management and soil protection and enrichment;
19. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that sacred sites, riverbanks, old-growth forests, wetlands and salt marshes are excluded from possible urbanisation, compaction or exploitation, in both the thematic strategy on the urban environment and the regional planning instruments; considers that sites with contaminated soil can be used for certain purposes permitted by planning law subject to pollution-specific requirements relating to remediation or protection;
20. Calls on the Commission to draw up guidelines for the recovery of contaminated soil in urban and fringe areas including (1) an appropriate definition of soil typologies allowing their possible uses to be characterised, (2) the setting of sufficient periods of time for their recovery, (3) research into the use of simpler and more efficient systems and experimental biological treatment techniques and (4) soil history;
21. Asks that, in carrying out impact assessments on underground and surface infrastructure and urban construction projects, Member States should consider the effects on natural surface or underground water flows, including measures to conserve permeable soil, and that account should also be taken of the impact of the fragmentation of natural water flows, sites and habitats when plans are drawn up; calls, likewise, for the Environmental Impact and Strategic Environmental Assessment Directives to be applied when implementing the urban and regional thematic strategy;
22. Highlights the need to integrate soil protection objectives in spatial planning strategies and to commit itself to the further development of the European Spatial Development Perspective; calls on the Commission, in the communication that it is due to submit in 2003 on 'Planning and Environment – the territorial dimension', to study ways of preventing the soil sealing which occurs when new areas are assigned for urban development and infrastructure; calls for rules to be introduced bringing land use into line with soil characteristics, taking account of social values, and putting an end to the indiscriminate sealing of land;
23. Takes the view that the topography, structure and natural form of the land must be respected in housing development processes in the interests of sustainable development; considers it necessary, further, to restrict soil sealing and the distortion of natural rock and land formations, and considers it necessary to exercise greater control over the disappearance of soil and prevent the environmental and visual impact of large-scale excavations to extract aggregate;

¹ OJ L 181, 4.7.1986, p. 6.

24. Notes, in connection with transport, that road infrastructure in particular, and to a lesser extent rail infrastructure, can constitute a threat to the soil through covering and impacting (by pressure from heavy vehicles) and the bisection of eco-systems; stresses in this connection the importance of water transport, as set out inter alia in the White Paper on Transport, and the need, for projects in the framework of the Trans-European Networks, to carry out environmental impact assessments pursuant to Directive 2001/42/EC¹; calls on the Commission to encourage the use of innovative sustainable technologies and products in road-building, such as Very Open-graded Asphalt Concrete;
25. Considers it necessary to gain greater understanding of the functions performed by species which live in the soil, the nutrient cycle and the water cycle; believes it is crucial to apply the precautionary principle and to make sure that the Sixth Environmental Action Programme and EU environmental legislation such as the Habitats, Birds and Water Framework Directives are fully respected; further believes that Community policies should be revised, where necessary, to better protect the natural balance by preventing decline in biodiversity;
26. Urges the Commission to design a system for providing a reliable and up-to-date estimate of the costs and economic implications of soil degradation as an integral part of the thematic strategy for soil protection;
27. Considers that the desertification process affecting various regions in the Union and its socio-economic repercussions and impact on the natural environment have not been adequately reflected or met with sufficient awareness in certain Community bodies; urges the Commission to submit a communication on desertification immediately; calls on the Commission, consequently, to include in it a Community action programme containing a precise description of the zonification of regions affected or likely to be affected by the desertification process, together with a detailed analysis of the causes and socio-economic effects on the regions and their consequences for the human environment, the natural environment and the water cycle, and to identify appropriate Community actions to help to limit the negative effects of that process;
28. Agrees with the Commission's description of erosion as an 'EU-wide problem' and calls on the Commission to initiate a Community-level action programme taking appropriate account of coastal erosion, which threatens not only residential areas but also infrastructure and cultural sites;
29. Calls on the Commission to study the implications of climate change for erosion and the desertification process and develop proposals for the Member States with a view to mitigating its effects;
30. Calls on the Commission to maintain and promote new aid for the prevention of forest fires, a key factor in soil erosion which is a particularly serious phenomenon in the Mediterranean countries; considers that, in addition to aid for fire prevention, more funding needs to be allocated to maintain the traditional soil management practices which have proved so beneficial for their conservation;

¹ OJ L 197, 21.7.2001, p. 30.

31. Stresses the importance of sustainable forest management for soil protection and calls on the Member States to take measures to prohibit urban development on forest land damaged by fire and to ensure that its recovery is based on suitable species which will not have adverse effects on the environmental and water balance in the region;
32. Recommends that soil research be reviewed, so as to encourage research into the relationship between agriculture and soil, crops with a water deficit and other measures against desertification, as well as research into the effects of artificial fertilisers and plant protection products on soil biodiversity, with priority being given to interdisciplinary research; considers it necessary to include research on urbanisation processes and the impact of soil sealing;
33. Insists that any planning and soil conservation strategy should include objectives relating to environmental education geared to those sectors and agents who, through their incorrect practices, contribute to soil degradation (farmers, the food industry, farms producing slurry, the wood extraction sector, etc.);
34. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the parliaments of the Member States and accession countries.