

Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection

European Parliament resolution of 13 November 2007 on the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection (2006/2293(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Commission communication "Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection" (COM(2006)0231) and the Impact Assessment of the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection (SEC(2006)0620),
 - having regard to the Sixth Community Environment Action Programme (EAP)¹,
 - having regard to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol as regards their direct and indirect links with the soil functions and the protection of the soil,
 - having regard to its resolution of 19 November 2003 on the Commission Communication "Towards a Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection" ²,
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and the opinion of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A6-0411/2007),
- A. whereas soil is a key component of the geographical environment, is the interface between the earth (lithosphere), the air (atmosphere) and the water (hydrosphere) and is the basis for essential functions for life on earth; whereas several Community policies aim at protecting these functions and the impact assessment by the Commission demonstrates that, despite these policies, soil destruction, erosion and degradation are increasing, while efforts designed to restore the fertility and productive functions of soil are not achieving the desired effects, resulting in a growing impact on other environmental areas, as well as on human and animal health,
- B. whereas overall protection of the soil and its environmental, economic, social, ecological and cultural functions is a precondition for addressing the main international environmental challenges, such as the mitigation of and the adaptation to climate change, the safeguarding of sufficient and clean water, combating falling groundwater levels, preventing natural and man-made disasters, the protection of biodiversity and the fight against desertification, steppe formation and deforestation, as well as actions designed to prevent soil pollution and halt processes leading to wholesale soil degradation or destruction,
- C. whereas soil structure and characteristics are the product of soil formation,

¹ OJ L 242 10.9.2002, p. 1.

² OJ C 87 E, 7.4.2004, p. 395.

geomorphological and geological processes occurring over thousands of years, thus making it a non-renewable resource; whereas, therefore, it is far more cost-effective to prevent any kind of damage to soil strata (erosion, destruction, degradation, salinisation, etc.) and soil contamination than to try to restore soil functions,

- D. whereas voluntary national initiatives and existing national measures are important for achieving the objective of greater soil protection,
1. Welcomes the Commission's thematic strategy for soil protection, following on from its 2002 communication on the subject (COM(2002)0179) which clearly demonstrates the need for effective and productive soil protection measures in EU Member States, and the proposal to adopt a framework directive on soil protection;
 2. Notes that soil degradation has local and regional causes and impact, and that occasional transboundary effects are caused by regional geomorphological factors and consequently require intergovernmental measures;
 3. Points out that human activity affects soil functions and use in various ways and that a Community strategy must therefore help to protect those pieces of farmable land that are under greatest threat, for example in connection with land use changes, contaminated industrial sites, soil sealing and erosion;
 4. Is concerned at the consequences of soil degradation, whether natural or the result of human activity; stresses the need for a European strategy to identify and remedy the problems linked to the degradation of soils;
 5. Firmly believes that the huge diversity in terms of types of soil (320, with numerous sub-types) necessitates, in addition to national bottom-up approaches, a European strategy based on prevention, public awareness, information and the identification of risk areas to deal with this problem at European level; calls on Member States without soil protection legislation to shoulder their responsibilities for soil protection, taking also into account the responsibilities of owners; considers, in particular, that regional and local authorities should play a major part in formulating objectives and plans for soil protection;
 6. Considers that the thematic strategy needs to be strengthened in all Member States, and that much more dynamic progress will be made in implementing the strategy if it is complemented by financial aid measures financed from available budget appropriations for cohesion regions;
 7. Notes that soil is a shared resource; stresses that, unlike water, air and biodiversity, that do have specific Community legislation, soil, which is a crucial factor in the long-term, sustainable production of food, feed, fibres, and, increasingly, of biomass, has no such legislation;
 8. Stresses that, in accordance with the principles of better lawmaking, an EU framework directive is fully justified given that the evaluation of existing EU legislation, which should first be supplemented, and of voluntary options based on the transfer of know-how still reveals gaps in soil protection;
 9. Calls for new European rules to be considered, if still deemed necessary, only on the basis of such measures, and in that case to lay down binding standards for improvements;

10. Agrees with the Commission that there is a need for a framework directive on soil protection, because of the important role of the soil in addressing international challenges such as the decline of soil productivity, ecosystem services and biodiversity, caused by deforestation, deteriorating water quality, steppe formation, continued soil erosion, recurring floods and landslides, and in ensuring sufficient and safe food production ;
11. Believes that a framework directive is an adequate measure for soil protection, having due regard for the subsidiarity principle (Article 5, second paragraph, of the EC Treaty), and subject to proportionality (Article 5, third paragraph, of the EC Treaty), and could enable Member States that have not yet done so to develop soil policies without creating distortion of competition; believes that the framework directive should recognise the already existing national and Community legislation and should not add any unnecessary administrative burden on Member States, regional and local authorities, and land owners;
12. Points out that the high degree of soil diversity, the regionally differentiated problem areas and the existing national soil protection blueprints must be taken into account by ensuring that Member States retain a considerable degree of flexibility when designing the legislative framework; states emphatically that soil is a policy area which, by virtue of its great diversity, requires tailor-made solutions that need to be developed at local and regional levels;
13. Concludes that a clear demarcation is needed between this directive and other European legislative standards relating to soil protection in order to avoid regulatory duplication;

Synergy with other Community policies

14. Proposes that an in-depth evaluation and analysis be carried out of directives already introduced in the European Union, such as the Groundwater Directive and the Nitrates Directive, and that the extent to which Member States are meeting the cross-compliance conditions applicable to farmers be evaluated and analysed; considers that, on the basis of this analysis, binding measures may, if necessary, be drawn up to promote soil quality; notes that it will also be possible, on the basis of this analysis, to carry out an exchange of information within the EU in order to promote soil quality;
15. Calls on the Commission to examine the implementation in Member States of relevant soil protection provisions in other Community legislation on air, water, waste, climate change, biodiversity, desertification, agriculture, energy, products, industry, transport and regional development, and to report to the European Parliament before the end of 2008 on how such legislation can be better used for increased soil protection;
16. Endorses the Commission's view that soil conditions need to be improved in many European regions, but believes that the Commission should make greater efforts to ensure consistency with current legislation;
17. Stresses the need to avoid overlapping, contradictions and inconsistencies in relation to existing EU rules;
18. Supports the Commission in its actions and its time schedule to review the Sewage Sludge and the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directives and to assess possible synergies between soil protection measures and measures under inter alia the Water Framework Directive; further calls on the Commission to assess possible synergies with the

Waste Directive;

19. Calls again on the Commission to develop as soon as possible a directive on the sound management of biowaste with the objective of reducing the amount of biowaste that is landfilled or incinerated and of promoting instead the production of compost and biogas; points out that compost and treated residues from the production of biogas which are of suitable quality can greatly support the preservation and increase of soil organic matter;

Climate change

20. Recognises that a change in soil use can result in an increase in carbon sequestration or in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, for example in the case of deforestation, or when peatlands are drained as a result of inappropriate phyto-irrigation or aquatic irrigation, or permanent grasslands ploughed up or through inappropriate ploughing of slopes; recognises that not only does soil use have a strong impact on climate change, but that climate change itself can result in severe soil degradation or erosion;
21. Recognises that climate change, through changes in temperature and rainfall, may have large impacts on the biogeochemical cycles in soils that affect soil fertility; recognises also that especially changes in soil nutrient and water balances and their effect on food production, nutrient and contaminant transport and soil water availability need further attention in a changing climate;
22. Calls on the Commission to consider measures, including a common minimum levy, for example, on carbon loss; such levies must be collected at national level and the proceeds must be used to resolve the pollution problem that provides the basis for the levy, for example, to develop systems involving more carbon sequestration;
23. Urges the Council and the Commission to take into account the important role of soil policies in both the mitigation of climate change and adaptation to the impacts of climate change in their negotiations on a post-2012 regime under the UNFCCC;
24. Calls on the Commission to promote further research on the soil's role in increasing water retention and combating falling groundwater levels, in mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and to identify possible best practices on measures that increase carbon sequestration in the soil, and to report to the European Parliament before the end of 2009, when an ongoing Commission study will have delivered some results;

Agriculture

25. Notes that productive agricultural land is an increasingly scarce global resource and that this calls for sustainable agricultural practices that preserve valuable soil qualities;
26. Recognises that unsustainable agricultural practices may have profound adverse effects on soils and downstream waters through failure to protect sensitive biogeochemical balances and soil biodiversity;
27. Points out that agriculture and forestry play a crucial role in maintaining soil quality and revitalising soil, and that there is considerable self-interest on the part of those engaged in farming and forestry in maintaining their land in good condition as a basis of production; draws attention to the need to avoid the permanent sealing of soils of high ecological or

productive value, and prevent them from being covered with artificial surfaces as a result of urban development and other infrastructure, especially those located in zones such as river plains, fertile farmland and coastal zones; calls for all public authorities from local to Community level to pay particular attention to the latter, which are under strong pressure from human activity;

28. Calls on the Commission to establish priorities as to how Europe's land area is to be used so that the soil is protected in the best way possible and a basis is created for high levels of biodiversity and carbon sequestration; in addition to sequestration in the soil, it should be ensured that woods, shelter belts and, not least, agro-forestry are included;
29. Reiterates its call on the Commission to establish a catalogue of agricultural practices and their different effects on soil, so that best agro-technical practices can be promoted in line with the characteristics of farming and its benefits for the soil and the wider environment;
30. Calls on the Commission to promote show-cases of sustainable agricultural practices geared towards soil conservation;

Biodiversity

31. Considers it crucial to apply the precautionary principle and to make sure that the Sixth EAP 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, so as to better prevent decline in biodiversity;

Research

32. Calls on the Commission to promote further research on the soil's role in protecting biodiversity and soil biodiversity, in the fields of processes underlying soil functions, spatial and temporal changes in soil processes, ecological, economic and social drivers of soil threats, factors influencing soil eco-services and operational procedures and technologies for soil protection and restoration. There are first steps in this direction in the Seventh Framework Programme for research (2007-2013)¹, which covers research into soil functions as part of its "Environment" and "Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology" priority areas;

Desertification and steppe formation

33. Considers that the worsening desertification and steppe formation process affecting various regions in the Union is a result of significant anthropressure, caused by deforestation of vast areas and excessive desiccation of grasslands, and that its socio-economic repercussions and impact on the natural environment have not been adequately reflected or met with sufficient awareness in certain Community bodies; recognises the need for greater research and awareness throughout the Community;
34. Points out, in this connection, that 14 Member States are affected by desertification, and that the remaining 13, even if they are not actually affected, are subject to regional or local environmental pressures such as erosion or salinisation;

¹ Decision No 1982/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013) (OJ L 412, 30.12.2006, p. 1).

35. Considers that the framework directive will greatly enhance the implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and will strengthen the efforts to prevent and mitigate desertification and steppe formation in the affected countries of the European Union; believes that the knowledge and expertise gathered in the context of the Soil Thematic Strategy should be transferred and shared with Third World countries suffering from desertification;
36. Urges the Commission to submit a communication on desertification and steppe formation, firstly in the EU and then worldwide, containing a precise description of the regions affected or likely to be affected by the desertification process and steppe formation, together with a detailed analysis of the causes and socio-economic effects on the regions, and identifying appropriate Community actions to help limit the negative effects of these processes;

Contamination

37. Considers that prevention of soil contamination is very important to preserve the proper physical and chemical properties of soil as well as soil quality and to ensure the protection of other elements of the natural environment, and therefore calls on the Commission to ensure that existing and future Community legislation adheres to this objective;
38. Believes that a systemic approach for the identification of contaminated sites, based on monitoring objective parameters and a common list of activities, is needed to gather the necessary information and establish databases in order to manage the legacy of soil contamination, thus giving a signal to economic operators so that they take effective preventive measures to avoid future contamination;
39. Stresses that the procedure for identifying contaminated land must be linked to the requirement of suspected risk in order to achieve an appropriate and proportionate solution to the problem (risk-based approach);
40. Emphasises that, alongside the various remediation procedures such as decontamination and stabilisation, further options should also be included such as appropriate protection and limitation measures or the resort to natural processes of pollutant reduction;
41. Supports the Commission in its approach to increase public knowledge of contaminated sites or sites which may be threatened with contamination and the transparency of land transactions based on local land development plans, in particular through the establishment of the soil status report and especially for places where activities with potential to cause soil contamination have been or are being carried out;
42. Welcomes the establishment of a Europe-wide platform for the exchange of information between Member States since it promotes the transfer of know-how and may open the way to synergies; urges that, for the voluntary establishment of a platform of this kind as part of an EU soil protection strategy, a pragmatic approach should be aimed for on cost grounds alone, having regard to the systems existing in Member States;
43. Stresses that the reporting and documentation requirements laid down in the framework directive must be confined to what is strictly necessary so as not to impose an excessive burden on towns, municipalities and regions; in particular, Member States need to be able to use their own reporting systems;

Monitoring, impacts of natural disasters, training and education

44. Calls on the Commission to ensure that soil protection and its links with climate change, biodiversity, deforestation, land drainage, desertification, steppe formation, falling groundwater levels, acidification, erosion and increased risks as a result of natural and man-made disasters will be dealt with under the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) and INSPIRE as a matter of priority;
45. Calls on the Commission to promote further research on the increased risks of floods and landslides resulting from sealing and soil subsidence, and the increased impacts of floods, landslides and seismic activity due to increasing population density and activities in coastal areas, river basins and areas surrounding volcanoes and areas with large-scale CO₂ and SO₂ emitters, and to identify best practices to address these increased risks;
46. Calls on the Commission to provide the initiative for, and to develop schemes to encourage, the transfer of know-how relating to best practice under national soil protection legislation;
47. Calls on the Commission to identify more structural ways to improve training and education within the European Union on soil classification, sampling, monitoring and possible best practices on soil protection, exchange of information and best practice, increasing knowledge of the importance and need for soil protection and also promoting best agrotechnical practices in agriculture aimed at restoring the productive function of soil;

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48. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.