

Thematic strategy for soil protection

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the initiative report by Vittorio **PRODI** (ALDE, IT) in which it welcomes the Commission's communication on the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection.

It 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. It is concerned at the consequences of soil degradation, whether natural or the result of human activity and stresses the need for a European strategy to identify and remedy the problems linked to the degradation of soils.

The committee 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. It calls on Member States without soil protection legislation to shoulder their responsibilities for soil protection, taking also into account the responsibilities of owners and considers, in particular, that regional and local authorities should play a major part in formulating objectives and plans for soil protection.

MEPs consider 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.

The report notes that soil, which is a crucial factor in the long-term, sustainable production of food, feed, fibres, and, increasingly, of biomass, has no specific Community legislation and it agrees with the Commission that there is a need for a **framework directive on soil protection**.

MEPs believe that a framework directive is an adequate measure for soil protection and could enable Member States that have not yet done so to develop soil policies without creating distortion of competition. 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.

MEPs stress 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: MEPs propose 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. They consider that, on the basis of this analysis, binding measures may, if necessary, be drawn up to promote soil quality. The Commission is called upon 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;

- assess possible synergies with the Waste Directive;
- 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.

Climate change: aware that a change in soil use can result in an increase in carbon sequestration or in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, the committee 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. Account should be taken of 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. The report 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: the report notes that productive agricultural land is an increasingly scarce global resource and that this calls for sustainable agricultural practices that preserve valuable soil qualities. The committee 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;
- 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;
- promote show-cases of sustainable agricultural practices geared towards soil conservation.

Research: the committee 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 proposal for the Seventh Framework Programme (2007-2013), which covers research into soil functions as part of its "Environment" and "Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology" priority areas.

Desertification and steppe formation: the report states 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. The Commission is urged 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: underlining the importance of the prevention of soil contamination, the committee calls on the Commission to ensure that existing and future Community legislation adheres to this objective. MEPs believe 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. The establishment of a **Europe-wide platform** for the exchange of information between Member States has been welcomed

since it promotes the transfer of know-how and may open the way to synergies. The report 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: the Commission is called upon to: i) 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; ii) develop schemes to encourage the transfer of know-how relating to best practice under national soil protection legislation; 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.