Thematic strategy for soil protection

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Vittorio **PRODI** (ALDE, IT) in which it welcomed the Commission's communication on the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection.

Parliament noted that soil degradation had local and regional causes and impact, and that occasional trans-boundary effects were caused by regional geomorphological factors and consequently required intergovernmental measures. The huge diversity in terms of types of soil (320, with numerous sub-types) necessitated, 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. Member States without soil protection legislation must shoulder their responsibilities for soil protection, taking also into account the responsibilities of owners. Regional and local authorities should play a major part in formulating objectives and plans for soil protection. Parliament stated emphatically that soil was a policy area which, by virtue of its great diversity, required tailor-made solutions that need to be developed at local and regional levels.

MEPs considered that the thematic strategy needed to be strengthened in all Member States. Much more dynamic progress would be made in implementing the strategy if it were complemented by financial aid measures financed from available budget appropriations for cohesion regions.

Parliament noted that soil, which was a crucial factor in the long-term, sustainable production of food, feed, fibres, and, increasingly, of biomass, had no specific Community legislation and it agreed with the Commission about the need for a **framework directive** on soil protection. Such a directive could enable Member States 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. There must be a clear demarcation between this directive and other European legislative standards relating to soil protection in order to avoid regulatory duplication.

Synergy with other Community policies: MEPs proposed that an in-depth evaluation be carried out of directives already introduced in the EU, such as the Groundwater Directive and the Nitrates Directive, and that the extent to which Member States were meeting the cross-compliance conditions applicable to farmers be evaluated and analysed. On the basis of this analysis, binding measures might 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 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: recognising that a change in soil use could result in an increase in carbon sequestration or in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, Parliament called 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 provided 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 called on the Commission to promote further research on the soil's role in increasing water retention and combating falling groundwater levels, and to identify possible best practices on measures that increase carbon sequestration in the soil. Parliament asked for a report before the end of 2009.

Agriculture: Parliament noted that productive agricultural land was an increasingly scarce global resource. This called for sustainable agricultural practices that preserved valuable soil qualities. The Commission was asked to:

- establish priorities as to how Europe's land area was to be used so that the soil was protected in the best way possible and a basis was 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 were included;

- establish a catalogue of agricultural practices and their different effects on soil, so that best agro-technical practices could 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 Commission was asked to promote 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.

Desertification and steppe formation: the report stated that 14 Member States were affected by desertification, and that the remaining 13, even if they were not actually affected, were subject to regional or local environmental pressures such as erosion or salinisation. The Commission was urged to submit a communication on desertification and steppe formation 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, Parliament called on the Commission to ensure that Community legislation adhered to this objective. MEPs believed that a systemic approach for the identification of contaminated sites, based on monitoring objective parameters and a common list of activities, was needed in order to manage the legacy of soil contamination. This would give a signal to economic operators so that they take effective preventive measures to avoid future contamination. Parliament welcomed the establishment of a Europe-wide platform for the exchange of information between Member States since it promoted the transfer of know-how and might open the way to synergies. It urged 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.

Monitoring, impacts of natural disasters, training and education: the Commission is called upon to do the following:

- 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 would be dealt with under the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) and INSPIRE as a matter of priority;

- promote 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 higher population density 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;

- 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 EU 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 agro-technical practices in agriculture aimed at restoring the productive function of soil.