Resolution on soil protection

2021/2548(RSP) - 28/04/2021 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 605 votes to 55, with 41 abstentions, a resolution on soil protection.

The resolution highlighted that soil is an essential, complex, multifunctional and living ecosystem of crucial environmental and socioeconomic importance which performs many key functions and delivers services vital to human existence and ecosystem survival so that current and future generations can meet their own needs.

The Earth's soils constitute the largest terrestrial carbon store and contain roughly 2 500 gigatons of carbon (1 gigaton = 1 billion metric tons), compared with 800 gigatons in the atmosphere and 560 gigatons in animal and plant life. Healthy soils are crucial for climate change mitigation as they remove approximately 25 % of the equivalent carbon emitted through the world's fossil fuel use each year. The world's cultivated soils have lost 50-70 % of their original carbon stock.

Although soil is very dynamic, it is also very fragile and is a non-renewable, finite resource, given the length of time soil formation requires, at a pace of around one centimetre of top soil every 1 000 years. This makes soil a very precious resource.

Several key threats to soil have been identified in the EU such as: climate change, sealing, compaction erosion, floods and landslides, droughts, hydrogeological instability, loss of soil organic matter, fires, storms, salinisation, contamination, loss of soil biodiversity, acidification and desertification. Most of these ongoing degradation processes are not adequately addressed or are not addressed at all in existing EU and national legislation.

Lack of EU legal framework

The resolution stressed that the lack of a comprehensive, adequate, coherent and integrated EU legal framework for protecting Europe's land and soil resources has been identified as a key gap that contributes to the continuous degradation of many soils within the EU, reduces the effectiveness of the existing incentives and measures, and limits Europe's ability to achieve its environmental, sustainable development and climate-related agenda and international commitments.

An earlier attempt to introduce a legal framework for soil protection in the EU was without success as it was withdrawn in May 2014 after being blocked for eight years by a minority of Member States in the Council.

A coherent and adequate EU soil protection policy is a prerequisite to achieve the objectives of the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, and in particular, the climate neutrality objective, the farm-to-fork strategy, the biodiversity strategy, the zero-pollution ambition, the bioeconomy strategy and other main environmental and societal challenges.

The importance of soil

Parliament underlined the multifunctional role of soil (provision of food, carbon sink, platform for human activities, biomass production, biodiversity pool, flood and drought prevention, source of raw materials, pharmaceutical and genetic resources, water and nutrient cycling, storage and filtering, storing of

geological and archaeological heritage, etc.) and the resulting need to protect, sustainably manage and restore it, and preserve its capacity to fulfil its multiple roles by means of stable European-level and cross-border levels of intra-Community cooperation and with non-EU countries.

Coherent and integrated EU soil protection framework

Parliament called on the Commission to design an EU-wide common legal framework for the protection and sustainable use of soil, addressing all major soil threats, which shall include, *inter alia*:

- common definitions of soil, its functions, and criteria for its good status and sustainable use;

- objectives, indicators, including harmonised indicators, and a methodology for the continuous monitoring of and reporting on soil status;

- measurable intermediate and final targets with harmonised datasets and measures to tackle all identified threats and appropriate timelines, taking into consideration best practices learned from 'first mover' efforts and respecting land ownership rights;

- clarification of the responsibilities of different stakeholders;

- a mechanism for the sharing of best practices and training, as well as adequate control measures;

- effective integration with relevant policy targets and instruments.

- adopt regulatory measures to prevent and mitigate the pollution of soil by chemicals.

Financial support

The resolution called for sufficient financial support and incentives to promote soil protection, its sustainable management, conservation and restoration, and innovation and research via the common agricultural policy, cohesion policy, Horizon Europe and other available financial instruments.