

# Thematic strategy for soil protection

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**PURPOSE:** to propose a strategy to ensure that Europe's soils remain healthy and capable of supporting human activities and ecosystems.

**BACKGROUND:** soil is a resource of common interest to the EU and failure to protect it at EU level will undermine sustainability and long term competitiveness in Europe. It is rapidly degrading in many places across the EU exacerbated by human activity, such as certain agricultural and forestry practices, industrial activities, tourism or urban development. An estimated 115 million hectares or 12% of Europe's total land area are subject to water erosion, and a further 42 million hectares by wind erosion. Approximately 3.5 million sites within the EU could be contaminated. About 45% of European soils have low organic matter content, principally in southern Europe but also other Member States are concerned. Different EU policies already contribute to soil protection but no coherent policy exists. Only nine Member States have specific legislation on soil protection, often covering a specific threat, in particular soil contamination.

Soil degradation has strong impacts on other areas of common interest to the EU, such as water, human health, climate change, nature and biodiversity protection, and food safety. Soil protection is not only a national concern as soil contamination in one Member State can have transboundary effects and cause pollution and economic burdens on neighbouring states. Also, different ways of dealing with soil problems may distort competition for economic operators within the internal market.

**CONTENT:** against this background, the Commission considers that a comprehensive EU strategy for soil protection is required. This strategy should take into account all the different functions that soils can perform, their variability and complexity and the range of different degradation processes to which they can be subject, while also considering socio-economic aspects.

The **overall objective** is protection and sustainable use of soil, based on the following guiding principles: (i) preventing further soil degradation and preserving its functions; (ii) restoring degraded soils to a level of functionality consistent at least with current and intended use, thus also considering the cost implications of the restoration of soil. To achieve these objectives, action is required at different levels – local, national and European. Action at European level is a necessary addition to the action by Member States.

The strategy proposed by the Commission is built around **four key pillars**:

- framework legislation with protection and sustainable use of soil as its principal aim;
- integration of soil protection in the formulation and implementation of national and Community policies;
- closing the current recognised knowledge gap in certain areas of soil protection through research supported by Community and national research programmes;
- increasing public awareness of the need to protect soil.

Having examined different options, the Commission proposes a **Framework Directive** as the best means of ensuring a comprehensive approach to soil protection whilst fully respecting subsidiarity. The Framework Directive sets out common principles, objectives and actions. It requires Member States to adopt a systematic approach to identifying and combating soil degradation, tackling precautionary measures and integrating soils protection into other policies. But it allows for flexibility - it is for the

Member States to decide the level of ambition, specific targets and the measures to reach those. This is because soil degradation offers a very scattered picture throughout Europe, where 320 major soil types have been identified.

Member States are required to identify areas where there is a risk of erosion, organic matter decline, compaction, salinisation and landslides. They must set risk reduction targets for those areas and establish programmes of measures to achieve them. They will also have to prevent further contamination, establish an inventory of contaminated sites on their territory and draw up national remediation strategies. When a site is being sold, where a potentially contaminating activity has taken or is taking place, a soil status report has to be provided by the seller or the buyer to the administration and the other party in the transaction. Finally, the Member States are required to limit or mitigate the effects of sealing, for instance by rehabilitating brownfield sites.

The Strategy will boost research on soil and raise public awareness and ensure public participation in the preparation and review of the programmes of measures adopted by the Member States.