

EEB discussion paper for 4 July Soil Policy workshop (July 4, 2005)

Why do we need an EU Soil Policy? Time for common protection targets

Soil is one of the basic natural resources, next to water and air from which all other resources stem. It is for example the basis of 90% of all human food livestock, fibre and fuel. The degradation of this resource in Europe is a very real and well documented problem that, if not properly addressed, can have far reaching consequences for sustainable agricultural production, ecosystem services and human health.

The permanent loss of soil due to sealing is continuing at high rates, increasing flood risks and reducing groundwater resources. Rapid loss of organic matter, poses a threat to long term soil fertility and contributes to the problem of climate change. Contamination with chemicals via air or direct input through pesticides, fertilisers, manure and waste leads to a loss of biodiversity and a growing accumulation of persistent substances, with potentially irreversible negative impacts on human health and economic activities.

Contrary to the environmental media, air and water, there is no EU legislation setting common standards to protect this resource. Considering that the quality of water to a large extent depends on soil quality this seems to be a serious omission, rendering some environmental policies ineffective as they fail to address the source of the problem. It is urgent time to fill this gap on EU environmental quality standards.

When discussing the costs of a soil policy, it is also crucial to consider the costs of inaction. The total costs of cleaning up contaminated sites in Europe have been estimated at between 59 and 109 billion EUR by the EEA. Prevention of further contamination is therefore of paramount importance. Prevention in turn, can not be achieved with out targets and objectives.

The need for strategic and quantitative targets

The general objective of soil protection is clear and little disputed: preserve functions, avoid deterioration, and ensure sustainable use.... Nevertheless such undefined objectives are meaningless to drive concrete action which will reverse the worrying trends identified.

Therefore strategic and quantified targets need to be set. The EEB demands following targets:

- **“Generation Target for Soils”**- By 2020 zero or natural background concentration for synthetic or natural hazardous substances (which are

liable to persist, bioaccumulate or cause irreversible or long-term negative impacts), in order to:

- Support a high “level of health protection” (EC Treaty)
- Achieve the WFD objective and OSPAR commitment
- **Reverse decline of organic matter content in order to:**
 - support the objective of halting biodiversity decline by 2010
 - support Europe’s climate change objectives
 - increase water storage and reduce floods and draughts.
- **Reverse trends of soil erosion, compaction, sealing, removal and contamination** caused by agricultural activities and inappropriate land use planning.

What must be in a Framework? Common quality standards and flexible measures

Integration of environmental protection in other policy fields is identified as one of the major challenges to achieve sustainable development. The Commission recognised in its 2004 review that that environmental policy integration “*has been limited so far*”.

There are two necessary and mutually supporting elements to achieve better integration:

1. Setting binding environmental targets at EU level
2. Process requirements like public participation, impact assessment, reporting and programmes of measures

Binding environmental targets are essential to provide existing EU environmental policies, including the IPPC with a common basis, and to provide the leverage to change well-trodden paths of powerful budgetary and business stakeholders, the second one helps to find cost-effective ways to achieve the objectives.

The experience the EEB gathered with the implementation of the IPPC and WFD Directive, which leave target setting to Member States is discouraging or worrying. In the case of the IPPC Directive a level playing field will not be achieved and the differences in emission controls from industrial installations are in some cases differing by a factor of 100. The need for harmonised environmental quality standards to make the IPPC work is becoming obvious. In case of the Water Framework Directive it is likely that key elements of the ecological characterisation in order to set the environmental objectives are missing at the EU level harmonisation and will lead to different ambitions in reducing negative impact from i.e. navigation or hydropower.