



#LAST  
CHANCE  
CAP

# AGRICULTURE POLICY MUST MAINTAIN AND RESTORE HEALTHY SOILS

Healthy soils are key to biodiversity, food security and play a fundamental role in fighting climate change, thereby a prerequisite for the successful implementation of Agenda 2030.

2 ZERO  
HUNGER



All agriculture depends on soil-related ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling and water regulation.

SDG 2 (Zero hunger) is the most straightforward link that connects soils, food production, and healthy living.

Soils fulfil a large number of functions and ecosystem services that explicitly bind them with other goals such as SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), and SDG 13 (Climate action).

SDG 15 calls for restoring degraded land and soil and striving to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.

Maintaining organic carbon-rich soils, restoring and improving degraded agricultural lands and, more generally, increasing soil carbon, play an important role in addressing the three-fold challenge of food security, adaptation of food systems and people to climate change, and mitigation of anthropogenic emissions.

6 CLEAN WATER  
AND SANITATION



13 CLIMATE  
ACTION



15 LIFE  
ON LAND



# CHALLENGES

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- Despite the crucial role soils play in achieving a number of SDGs, **land and soil governance in the EU is incomplete and fragmented and subject to low prioritization**, allowing a range of contradictions to be unaddressed. The failure to adopt an EU Soil Directive has largely contributed to this situation.
- **Intensified farming practices**, which extract nutrients from soils, address depletion of soil fertility by increasing the use of synthetic fertilizers, causing further problems to soil structure and fauna as well as for water quality due to leaking, **are still supported by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**.
- The implementation of EU environmental policies (Water Framework Directive, Nitrates Directive) is undermined by policy frameworks promoting large-scale commodity production (incl. CAP, pesticide approval process & biofuel incentives under the Renewable Energy Directive), unsustainable land development strategies, & enforcement gaps (e.g. monitoring of pesticide residues in soil is not required at the EU level). **This reflects deeper environmental governance issues**, notably the failure to follow through on the polluter-pays principle, and the disconnection between soil and land governance.
- **Soil biodiversity is reduced by intensive agriculture**, making soils less efficient and more sensitive to weather events such as extreme drought and rainfall.
- **Short-sighted chemical fertilizer applications in conventional farming are depleting soils at an alarming rate**. Agricultural intensification is causing also increasing soil contamination by pesticide residues, becoming an issue of increasing concern in Europe due to some pesticides' high soil persistence and toxicity to non-target species. Diffuse pollution by agrochemicals has become a major soil threat, and presents major human health risks.

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**SOILS ARE DEGRADING ACROSS EUROPE AND WE ARE LOSING AN AREA THE SIZE OF BERLIN AT 1 METRE'S DEPTH OF SOIL EVERY YEAR, COSTING FARMERS €1.2 BILLION. SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF EU FARMLAND ARE FACING SALINISATION AND DESERTIFICATION, WITH 32-36% OF EUROPEAN SUBSOILS HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO COMPACTION. LAND AND SOIL DEGRADATION HAVE MAJOR IMPLICATIONS FOR CLIMATE CHANGE, WHILE UNDERMINING EFFORTS TO MEET A VARIETY OF SDGS.**



**AROUND 45% OF THE MINERAL SOILS IN EUROPE HAVE LOW OR VERY LOW ORGANIC CARBON CONTENT (0-2% ORGANIC CARBON), WHILE SOIL CONTAMINATION AFFECTS UP TO THREE MILLION SITES.**



**SOIL EROSION AFFECTS 25% OF AGRICULTURAL LAND IN THE EU AND INCREASED BY SOME 20% BETWEEN 2000 AND 2010, AND THIS WHILE SOIL HOLDS 1/4 OF ALL BIODIVERSITY ON EARTH.**

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# CASE STUDY

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## **Set-aside fields increase the diversity of decomposers in soil in Hungarian agricultural landscapes**

Compulsory implementation of set-aside management, where fields or field edges are taken out of agricultural production to provide environmental benefits, was abolished in most EU countries in 2008, due to demands for higher production of cereal crops. However, in Hungary, set-aside remains a common management practice, where the establishment of sown set-aside fields is a requirement of certain agri-environment schemes in High Nature Value Areas.

Soil invertebrates help to decompose plant material, which contributes to nutrient cycling and therefore soil fertility. Studies have found that almost all species occurred in higher numbers in set-aside fields compared to neighboring wheat fields.

The researchers suggest that reduced agricultural activity, such as less use of chemicals or soil disturbance, allows habitats to develop a wider range of plants, which provides food and shelter for invertebrate decomposers. Set-aside fields that are removed from crop rotation for more than two years could be a valuable option for establishing 'Ecological Focus Areas' as part of greening under the Common Agricultural Policy, as these fields are likely to help conserve biodiversity both above and below ground.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The SDGs must serve as guidelines for CAP reform. All CAP structures and measures that do not clearly contribute towards the sustainability goals must be removed. Any schemes should be developed in a robust way in order for public money to deliver public goods.

In order to build climate-resilient and healthy agro-ecosystems, the various policies shaping agricultural pathways – CAP, research, and extension policies – must be reintegrated around a new paradigm: a shift towards agroecology.

In order to reconcile sustainable land development with healthy soils, an EU Soil & Land Directive needs to be adopted, in coordination with the Water Framework Directive.

## MONEY FOR NATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE

For the EU to be able to achieve all the SDGs, a clear minimum environmental baseline needs to be defined for all member states and farmers. Money for the more sustainable farmers to carry out biodiversity-friendly management ensures that EU taxpayers also receive a benefit (public goods).

- New soil management requirements need to be integrated into CAP conditionalities and agroecological soil management should be promoted via independent Farm Advisory Services (FAS).
- If the new flexibility is given to Member States as in the current proposal, then strong governance rules are needed to counterbalance it.
- Eco-Schemes need to be better defined, including their ambition and eligibility criteria.
- The European Soil Data Centre should be tasked with monitoring pesticide

residues as well as assessing the amount of carbon stored in European soils and setting targets for soil carbon absorption in line with IPCC recommendations and SDG requirements.

## END TO PERVERSE SUBSIDIES

The continued subsidization of industrial agriculture is incompatible with Agenda 2030: it undermines our production capacity by exhausting the natural resources and ecosystem services needed to produce food – and therefore can no longer be an acceptable use of public resources.

- To make environmental measures attractive, payments that facilitate the delivery of public goods for the environment, climate and animal welfare needs to be delivered as an incentive, and not as lost revenue.
- Risk Management Tools, such as insurance scheme for farmers should be voluntary for Member States and have lower co-financing rates.

## ENFORCEMENT OF LAW, IMPROVED GOVERNANCE AND PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

Clear and strong rules which are enforced help the EU achieve the SDGs. Allowing illegal activities are driving less 'competitive' (often more nature-friendly) farmers out of business.

- The result-based approach should be constantly updated and rely on increasingly strong data collection, the protection of soils needs to be further integrated into national and local development with appropriate reporting systems.
- Effective 'conditionality' must cover compliance with all articles of EU environmental protection laws and its enforcement must be checked.



We are 25 NGOs from across Europe working on social issues, supporting farmers, stopping climate change, protecting the environment, defending women's rights, young people, & gender equality, supporting fair trade, development, global justice, & workers' rights.

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