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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Council

Subject: Sustainable soil management
- Exchange of views

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Sustainable soil management plays an important role in agricultural production. In the Presidency's view, there is a need for a wide-ranging discussion on the condition of soils in order to ensure their preservation. The International Union of Soil Sciences has announced the International Decade of Soils (2015-2024), which sets this discussion within a wider context.
2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ includes several Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that tackle issues related to soil – particularly SDG target 15.3, the objective of which is to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.

¹ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.

SDG targets 2.4 (to ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality) and 3.9 (to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination) are also relevant. At the same time, agriculture has an important mission: to provide food security (SDG 2).

3. With the adoption of the SDGs, there is a growing awareness on the importance of soil and land at global level. This is reflected in the international agenda, e.g. the Land Degradation Neutrality initiative of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, the ongoing assessment of land degradation by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the recognition of the importance of soil carbon in UN Framework Convention to Combat Climate Change (COP21) and the activities of the Global Soil Partnership as well as the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines for Soil Sustainable Management (SSM)² under the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).
4. The main challenge is how to ensure food security and sufficient agricultural production while enhancing the sustainable management of soil. The current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) already contributes to sustainable soil management, but there are undoubtedly ways to improve the current tools in preparation for the future CAP.
5. The agricultural sector is also facing challenges related to the availability of agricultural land. Soil sealing often results in the consumption of agricultural soil. This is a serious cause for concern as soil formation is a very slow process, taking centuries to build up even a centimetre. Soil erosion, loss of soil organic matter and soil biodiversity, soil compaction and soil pollution have an impact on agricultural production and alter the normal functioning of the soil ecosystem. Ways of limiting, mitigating and compensating for the effects of soil sealing as the most intense form of land take should therefore be explored.

² <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl813e.pdf>.

II. STATE OF PLAY

6. On 4-6 October 2017, the Presidency organised a High-Level Conference on Soil for Sustainable Food Production and Ecosystem Services in Tallinn³. Based on the discussion that took place at the conference, the Presidency drew up a set of conclusions that were then circulated among the participants (see the Annex to this note). The conference tackled policy measures, climate change, soil data, and communication and awareness raising. The link between the sustainable management of soils and agricultural production was underlined.
7. On 13 July 2015, the 'Agriculture and Fisheries' Council discussed, as an AOB item, the 'Four parts per thousand: soils for food security and the climate' initiative⁴ which was supported by several delegations.
8. On 18 October 2017, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion on the subject of 'Land use for sustainable food production and ecosystem services'⁵.
9. The Commission Communication on the 'Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection'⁶ remains the most comprehensive EU framework addressing various forms of soil degradation. Since 2006, progress has been achieved through the non-legislative pillars including integration of soil protection in EU policies. Several actions have been taken at EU level, such as setting up an EU Expert Group on Soil Protection⁷, actions in the framework of the 7th Environment Action Programme⁸, and the Commission staff working document entitled 'Agriculture and Sustainable Water Management in the EU'⁹.

³ [https://www.eu2017.ee/political-meetings/soil-sustainable-food-production-and-ecosystem-services.](https://www.eu2017.ee/political-meetings/soil-sustainable-food-production-and-ecosystem-services)

⁴ 10709/15.

⁵ [http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/land-use-sustainable-food-production-and-ecosystem-services.](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/land-use-sustainable-food-production-and-ecosystem-services)

⁶ 13401/06 + ADD1, ADD 2.

⁷ [http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3336.](http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3336)

⁸ Decision No 1386/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2020 'Living well, within the limits of our planet', OJ L 354, 28.12.2013, p. 171–200.

⁹ 8705/17.

10. The Commission recently published an inventory of soil-related policies at EU and Member States level and gap analysis¹⁰ aiming to define a baseline for further soil policy development. An analysis of CAP measures addressing soil protection concludes that the CAP has a great potential for protecting soil. However, soil measures are scattered into cross-compliance, greening and rural development measures without specific quantified targets.
11. Although the 'Environment' Council is leading the soil protection process, the Presidency is of the view that agricultural production is dependent on soil management and vice versa. Furthermore, the sustainable use of agricultural soils for the production of food is of utmost importance for the future of Europe. Therefore, the Agriculture Ministers are invited to exchange views on sustainable soil management. In order to structure the exchange of views at the 'Agriculture and Fisheries' Council meeting on 6 November 2017, the Presidency has prepared questions, as set out below.
12. The Special Committee on Agriculture took note of the Presidency's background paper and questions reflected in document 13314/17 and agreed to forward them to the 'Agriculture and Fisheries' Council as presented in the current revised document (changes are made in the first question below and in the title of the Annex).

II. QUESTIONS FOR MINISTERS

13. Against this background and in order to frame the discussion, the Presidency invites the 'Agriculture and Fisheries' Council to address the following questions:

1) How to maintain, or in some cases increase, the current high level of agricultural production while ensuring that agricultural soils are managed sustainably? What policy measures are necessary to achieve this goal?

2) What are the best strategies for protecting valuable agricultural soils and avoiding soil sealing, at both EU and Member State levels?

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/soil/pdf/Soil_inventory_report.pdf.



Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

High-Level Conference on Soil for Sustainable Food Production and Ecosystem Services, 4-6 October 2017 in Tallinn, Estonia

CONCLUSIONS OF THE PRESIDENCY ON THE RESULTS OF THE CONFERENCE

EMPHASISING the role of agriculture in the sustainable use of soils in food production and providing ecosystem services;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the sustainable development goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015, which form the basis of a global guidance for the next 13 years;

RECOGNISING the increasing global need for food as well as European Union food security;

CONCENTRATING on sustainable food production, which is not possible without the protection of soils;

SUPPORTING the objective of halting desertification, restoring degraded land and soils and striving to achieve a land degradation-neutral world by 2030;

REGRETTING the fact that according to the State of the Environment Report 2015 by the European Environment Agency, soils are continuing to degrade in the EU and that the long-term trend is for further deterioration;

ACKNOWLEDGING that although the 7th Environment Action Programme aims to ensure that by 2020 land is being managed sustainably in the EU, that soil is being adequately protected and that the remediation of contaminated sites is well underway, European soils are not fully protected by a set of common rules;

NOTING that only a few EU Member States have a specific national legislation on soil protection and that the Commission is currently reflecting within an expert group on how soil quality issues could be addressed using a targeted and proportionate risk-based approach within a binding legal framework;

NOTING that in the Commission's Staff Working Document "Agriculture and Sustainable Water Management in the EU" soil has an important role to play in the achievement of good water status in the EU;

APPRECIATING the initiatives taken at the global, regional and national levels, particularly the Global and European Soil partnership, the People4Soil European Citizen Initiative and the "4pour1000"





Initiative: Soils for Food Security and Climate;

ADMITTING that the UN report “Status of the World's Soil Resources” (2015) highlighted how the major threats to soil in Europe are those related to contamination, the decline of soil’s organic matter, soil sealing and land taken due to urbanisation processes;

ACKNOWLEDGING the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management recently endorsed by the 155th session of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations Council that provide the necessary guidance and tools for effectively achieving sustainable soil management at the national level;

REFERRING TO the favourable context for further action created by the United Nations International Year of Soils (2015) and the ongoing International Decade of Soils (2015-2024);

EXPRESSING the need for a broad discussion on the condition of soils and methods for ensuring their preservation;

The following **CONCLUSIONS** are drawn from the Conference:

1. Policy measures

- 1.1. The new budget period for the Common Agricultural Policy shall ensure effective support for the sustainable use of agricultural land and soil with the aim of promoting soil health in combination with sustainable intensification of competitive agriculture. In order to achieve this, more performance-based measures and solutions should be introduced to the Common Agricultural Policy. The focus should shift to enabling policies that create positive incentives for farmers, and for which sufficient financing should be foreseen.
- 1.2. There is a further need for better solutions to help improve the condition of soils in agriculture, e.g. under greening measures and cross-compliance (good agricultural and environmental conditions) as well as through innovation and improved advisory services.

Moreover, in order to better take into account important local soil and land use characteristics, more targeted soil protection measures should be available for implementation in national Rural Development Programmes. Investments which contribute to environment- and climate-friendly technologies and land improvement systems should be preferred.

- 1.3. It is of great importance that the EU Member States protect agricultural soils from irreversible alternative uses and misuse with national soil protection regulations. In order to ensure sustainable food production and ecosystem services, it is essential for all Member States to continue protecting soils at a national level.





The crucial role that a healthy soil with an improved nutrient and water balance plays in maintaining the long-term resilience of farmers and ensuring food security should be acknowledged at various levels and related policy initiatives should be encouraged. In this context, it is of utmost importance to protect valuable agricultural land from soil sealing.

More should be done in the EU to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal of a land degradation-neutral world.

- 1.4. A coherent soil strategy at the EU level would provide the framework to coordinate efforts to survey soil status adequately, to lay down uniform terminology and define the priorities and importance of the various policy measures for achieving the good status of soils.

2. Climate change

- 2.1. Taking into account the climate agreements that have been reached at COP 21 and the important but often neglected role that soils play in the climate system, both existing and new initiatives on balancing the soil carbon cycle need to be supported.
- 2.2. Important national as well as regional soil initiatives that positively influence the climate, water or soil biodiversity should be prioritised in European Union funding programmes. However, taking into account that the condition of soils varies between Member States, these initiatives and the proposed measures and solutions must take national and regional differences into consideration.

3. Soil data

- 3.1. In order to implement a knowledge-based policy and to plan land use at the national, regional and local levels, the use of soil data should be increased in policymaking and in land use decisions. In addition, the quality and availability of soil data needs to be maintained and improved, especially in fields that have not yet been thoroughly researched.
- 3.2. In order to make better use of soil data, there is a need to modernise soil maps and further increase minimum standards for the spatial resolution of soil maps in European Union Member States.
- 3.3. In the European Union, it is essential to agree on the harmonised measurement and continuous monitoring of soils. This should be based on a limited number of indicators that denote changes in the soil condition and assess the effectiveness of soil protection measures.

The potential of big data must be fully explored and used. Collecting and linking soil data in a simple and efficient way for the end users enables a more precise analysis, an enhanced





implementation of precision agriculture and a wider use of on-farm technological tools, such as nutrient management plans. As a result, farmers can benefit from better information, making knowledge-based production decisions, reducing costs and increasing their productivity and income. It also has a positive impact on the environment by enabling better planning of crops and more efficient use of soils, as well as other resources and input, such as fertilisers, pesticides and water.

4. Communication and awareness-raising

- 4.1. There is a further need to increase awareness about the importance of soils in general and in food production specifically at all levels of education, supported by practical experience. The underlying aim of the communication should be the creation of incentives for a behavioural change to protect soils.
- 4.2. Professional marketing and communication strategies on different scales (local to European) are needed.
- 4.3. It is important to raise awareness of the condition of soils and its impact on the global ecosystem, including through the use of social media and journalism. Better awareness helps to promote investment in sustainable soil management as well as research and development activities.
- 4.4. To raise public awareness and to increase farmers' productivity and income, and to promote the use of more efficient and more environmentally friendly technologies, favourable conditions must be created through the efficient organisation of knowledge transfer and advisory services.

