

Vital Soil; the next Step towards a European Soil Strategy

- With the aim of giving guidance on which steps to take towards a European soil strategy, approximately 120 representatives of the EU Member States and Commission, as well as invited experts and stakeholders, met on 18-19 November 2004 in The Hague (Kurhaus, Scheveningen) for a conference organized by the Dutch Presidency and the Commission.
- The 2002 Commission communication “Towards a European Soil Strategy” formed the basis for the discussions, together with the conclusions of Council, European Parliament and several Committees. Reports and recommendations of the five technical working groups and the considerations of the expert advisory forum on soil established by the Commission in 2003 provided valuable material on which the Conference could draw.
- Building on this work the Conference placed emphasis on the next phase, including the thematic strategy itself.
- During the Conference the European Manifesto on Earth Heritage and Geodiversity was presented by 11 European and International organizations. They call on the Member states and the EU to study, value and protect Europe’s rich geodiversity and earth heritage and to incorporate it in policy, planning and related procedures.
- In preparation for the conference a questionnaire was sent to the Member States. The replies show that the priority threats identified in 2002 (contamination, erosion, loss of organic matter and biodiversity and sealing) still merit the highest attention. Furthermore the member states consider a clear description of objectives and principles of soil protection and management as important elements of the soil strategy.
- The Conference took note of the reflections of the Commission representative with regard to the presentation of the thematic strategy and the various possibilities of its form including a framework.

Main Conference Output

- EU soil policy should build on the agreed principles of European environmental and health policies and the principles of sustainable development and should be developed with transparent and inclusive approaches to assessments, planning and decision-making.
- Soil is an asset and, although the benefits of its sustainable use have not yet been fully quantified, the costs of degradation, while significant at the on-site level, are very much more substantial in terms of off-site effects. Climate change, globalization, food security, urbanization and the changing age structure of the rural population are all significant issues with regard to soil degradation and protection.
- In line with the EC Treaty and the future Constitution, soil protection requirements must be integrated into all relevant EU policies, with priority

given to the internal market policy and the Common Agricultural Policy notably through the use of cross-compliance introduced in the 2003 CAP reform, and to land use and spatial planning policies implemented by the Member States.

- However, soil also needs a policy framework to prevent any dissipation of its protective role and the need to protect it and its functions for future generations. Participants suggested that an EU soil protection policy be established which would require appropriate action at local, regional, national and EU level and clarification of rights and obligations on land owners and soil users. The policy framework should be established with long term objectives and a planned approach with due respect for subsidiarity. This framework approach can lead to greater ambition for protection and greater focus for the integration challenge.
- Working in groups the participants dealt with the following.
 - Soil related research in Europe should be structured following the well accepted DPISR framework which accounts for key relationships between degradation driving forces, pressures on soils, their quality status, degradation impacts (consequences) and (policy) responses. Multidisciplinary work, new concepts and data are urgently required to implement this approach for policy support and better management of soil resources. Research on soil threats is fundamental for guiding policies and identifying their priorities. Strategic soil research clusters have been already in place, as identified in the brochure “Scientific Basis for the Management of European Soil Resources”. There is now a need for an action plan reflecting these priorities with the proper allocation of funds (national + EU), notably in the future 7th Framework Programme for Research. In this view, the brochure as a basic document on soil research in Europe, will be sent to Member States for identifying region specific research needs.
 - Soil erosion, a multi-faceted phenomenon with various dynamics in the different regions of the EU, requires responses including the use of cross-compliance in agriculture and with objectives established through the framework policy approach.
 - Soil organic matter content is a key indicator of soil health. Priority should be placed on setting incentives and stimulating farmers to adopt management practices for optimum levels of soil organic matter. The participants noted the interlinkages between bio-diversity, erosion, and soil organic matter with the consequence that damages will coincide and the benefits of policy measures may be multiple.
 - Experience with existing legislation relating to contaminated soils identifies a need for a more intensive exchange of knowledge and good practice, and for building the further development of policy on such experience. Here, the policy framework could also include a platform or forum to monitor and manage progress within the policy frame.

- In order to ensure the benefits of the exogenous organic matter and guarantee the protection of the soil the importance of a revision of the sewage sludge directive and the introduction of biowaste legislation, were stressed. The Commission is encouraged to present draft-legislation on both issues. Standards for compost should address all relevant issues. Separate collection should be promoted.
 - The monitoring system has to be policy relevant, address the 8 threats, be cost-effective and make use as far as possible of existing instruments and schemes for instance CORINE and LUCAS. Remote sensing and new legislation eg INSPIRE have an important role to play. Monitoring should be developed in a step by step approach, addressing issues of comparability and harmonisation and should focus on risk areas. Use should be made of indicators and instruments in place for other linked media.
- The conference recognized the need for developing awareness for soil protection and considered the focal point of national soil directors as necessary to increase this awareness both in public and policy terms.