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Strategy for the protection and sustainable use of soil

Last updated in April 2010

Latest Developments

In March, Karl Falkenberg, Director General of DG Environment, at a Britcham breakfast called for a need to address the quality of water, air and soil. He noted that while water and air are well underway in Europe, there is no agreement on a strategy to address ways to protect soil quality among the member states, which would be a pre-condition to also be able to guarantee the good quality of air and water.

On 15 March, Environment Commissioner, Janez Potočnik, said that he was prepared to offer concessions to a group of six countries that are blocking a deal on the EU's first-ever law on soil protection. Speaking at a meeting of EU environment ministers in Brussels, Potočnik said he would make "further efforts to bring member states on board". Austria, Germany France, Malta, the Netherlands and the UK today re-stated their opposition to a draft directive on soil. The proposal, which would oblige countries to draw up plans to clean up contaminated soil and offset soil lost to urban expansion, has failed to make progress in the Council of Ministers for more than three years.

Potočnik promised to talk to all the ministers in the countries that are blocking a deal and said that he would address concerns that the EU was overstepping its competence and breaching the principle of subsidiarity where there is legislation at EU level only if member states cannot deal with an issue on their own. Spain, the current holder of the Council presidency, is continuing to get agreement on the proposal. Elena Espinosa, Spain's environment minister, said that her country would continue to work on the soil directive "in spite of the difficulties we are having" and expressed hope that the presidency would produce "a document that all 27 member states could sign up to".

Impact for golf management

- Course management
- Prevent soil degradation

Background

Last updated in February 2010:

The Spanish EU presidency (Jan-June 2010) plans to resurrect stalled discussions in the Council on the Draft Soil Directive.

In particular, MEPs and environmentalists are putting pressure on the French government to confirm it will no longer oppose a draft soil directive.



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Last month junior environment minister Chantal Jouanno said France would withdraw its opposition to the draft law. The member state was one of five countries – including Germany and the UK – that formed a blocking minority against the draft law back in 2007 discussing that soil management could be handled at national level.

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB) held a conference in November on soil protection but no French officials came to the meeting. The EEB urged the EU to break the deadlock over the issue.

On 21 January, discussions will resume on the Draft Soil Directive in the Council Working group.

[EU set to stop bickering over Soil Directive](#)

Last updated in October 2009:

On 24 September, the UK environment department, Defra, published a new strategy for soil protection in England. England's goal is to "significantly reduce" the rate of loss of stored soil carbon by 2020. In addition, other measures in the strategy include the development of a new action plan on peat protection in 2010 and code of practice for soil use on construction sites will also be addressed by next year.

The report sets out how the government plans to halt and reverse the degradation of England's soil over the next 20 years, working with farmers and other land managers, planners and construction companies to manage soil sustainably.

By 2050 the world will need to double current food production to feed a growing population. This would be possible only with healthy soils. Future sustainability of the UK's food supply will depend on maintaining the natural resources, including soil, on which production depends.

Environment Secretary Hilary Benn announced that measures must be taken to protect and improve the United Kingdom's soil to meet rising demand for food and to combat climate change. Hilary Benn said: "Soil is one of the building blocks of life. Good quality soils are essential for a thriving farming industry, a sustainable food supply, and a healthy environment."

The strategy sets out how the government will:

- Support farmers in managing agricultural soil, and address the threats to it;
- Reduce the rate of loss of carbon in soil to tackle climate change, and use soil to help adapt to the impacts of climate change;
- Provide a framework for action to protect peat habitats;
- Protect soils in urban areas during development and construction;
- Value soils in the planning system;
- Prevent pollution of soils, and deal with the historic legacy of contaminated land.



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Measures include:

- Guidance and training
- Advice for the agriculture industry on protecting and increasing soil organic matter
- Incentives and regulation to prevent soil degradation
- Monitoring of levels and threats to the soil

The UK was one of the countries that [blocked an agreement on a draft EU directive on soil protection](#). The country argued that the proposed directive was overly prescriptive, and [the issue could be better addressed at national level](#).

[Video: Hilary Benn talks about the importance of soil](#)

[Defra Press Release](#)

The importance of adopting a [Strategy for the protection and sustainable use of soil](#), which remains blocked at the European Council level, was stressed during the European Union Green Week 2009 session on the biodiversity aspects of adaptation to climate change, which took place in Brussels on 24 June 2009.

Previous Updates:

The European Commission published a Press Release on 5 March 2009 following a new report in which the **crucial role that soils can play in mitigating climate change** is underlined. The Commission indicated that soils contain around twice the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and three times the amount to be found in vegetation. Europe's soils are an enormous carbon reservoir, containing around 75 billion tonnes, and poor management can have serious consequences. According to the report, a failure to protect Europe's remaining peat bogs, for example, would release the same amount of carbon as an additional 40 million cars on Europe's roads. The report, a synthesis of the best available information on the links between soil and climate change, underlines the need to capture carbon in soils. The technique is cost competitive and immediately available, requires no new or unproven technologies, and has a mitigation potential comparable to that of any other sector of the economy. In line with the Thematic Strategy for soil protection, the current trend of soil degradation needs to be reversed, and soil management practices must be improved if a high rate of soil carbon capture is to be achieved.

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "Properly managed soils can absorb enormous quantities of carbon from the atmosphere, buying us valuable time to reduce emissions and move towards sustainability. But Europe's soils urgently need better protection, and the answer must be a coordinated solution. I welcome this report, which reinforces the message of the June 2008 Commission conference on Soil and Climate change, and gives a clear indication of the direction we need to take."

This Press Release which emphasizes the essential link between soil and climate change is in fact a political move and indicates the European Commission's desire to revive the 'Soil Quality Directive', which has been blocked at European Council level due to discrepancies between Member State positions.



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Links

Link to DEFRA website and "Save our Soils" Press Release:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2009/090924b.htm>

[Link to the "Green Week" homepage.](#)

Link to EC Press Release: "Climate change: Commission dishes the dirt on the importance of soil"

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/353&type=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for the protection of soil and amending directive 2004/35/ec

Environment: strategy for the protection and sustainable use of soil (amend. direct. 2004/35/EC)

Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection