

No soil, no life: A Soil Health Law for our future

European Parliament, 5 July 2023



No soil, no life: A Soil Health Law for our future

Event co-hosted by Ljudmila Novak (EPP), Maria Arena (S&D) and Martin Hojsík (RE)

WHEN

Wednesday 5 July 2023, 13:30 - 15:00

WHERE

European Parliament, Room: ASP 1E2

Hosted by MEPs Ljudmila Novak (EPP), Maria Arena (S&D) and Martin Hojsík (Renew)



In November 2021, the European Commission presented the Soil Strategy for 2030, aiming to achieve healthy soils in Europe by 2050. In this strategy, the Commission committed to a legislative proposal on soil. This proposal, the **Soil Monitoring Law**, was published on 5 July. The event “**No soil, no life: A Soil Health Law for our future**” provided a great opportunity for a first discussion on this legislative proposal, on expectations of the Europeans, as well as on crucial next steps towards its adoption. It brought together various stakeholders, including the Commission, farmers, private sector, Member States, scientists and civil society. Taking place on the same day as the proposal’s publication, **this event clearly indicated the collective desire of various stakeholders, and the**

European Parliament in particular, to advance with this matter. Living soils connect the dots between many important objectives of the EU, including fighting the climate and biodiversity crises and ensuring food security. By providing long-term resilience to food systems and farmers’ livelihoods and by sustaining productivity of many European economic sectors, healthy soils produce important socio-economic benefits to society. In turn, soil degradation results in significant economic costs of at least 50 billion euros per year, the cost of inaction outweighing the costs of action by a factor of six. **Currently, 60 to 70 percent of European soils are in bad health**, which underlines the importance of this first discussion on the new framework for its protection.

Opening statement by MEP Ljudmila Novak (EPP)

In her opening remarks, **MEP Ljudmila Novak** welcomed this first unified European framework for the safeguarding of soils and the fact that the Commission followed the calls of the European Parliament, a group of Member States in the Council, the EEA and the European Court of Auditors. Ms. Novak emphasised that soil is the very foundation of life and that healthy soils are indispensable for food production. Regrettably, she noted, European soils face numerous challenges. With the introduction of this Directive, however, there is hope that soil will finally receive the same level of protection as other environmental elements, such as air and water.

"Soils have long awaited adequate protection, and we cannot afford any further delays. I am confident that this event will demonstrate that where there is a will, there is a way, and progress follows."



Ljudmila Novak
MEP
European People's Party

Presentation of the Soil Monitoring Law proposal by Ion Codescu



Ion Codescu

Head of Land Use and Management Unit
Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission

Ion Codescu, Head of the Land Use and Management Unit in the Directorate-General for Environment, provided an **overview of the newly published Soil Monitoring Law proposal**. During his presentation, he emphasised the poor condition of EU soils and their significance for achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal. Healthy soils are essential for farmers and foresters and key to protecting the health of citizens.

He went on to explain the **various elements of the legislative proposal for a Soil Monitoring Law**: This includes defining what qualifies as healthy soil, establishing descriptors that strongly affect soil health and should be monitored, outlining guidelines for sustainable soil management and contaminated sites.

He made it clear that the proposal

offers a considerable amount of **flexibility** to Member States. While it aims to work towards the target of achieving healthy soils by 2050, it does not set any intermediate targets or clear binding obligations in order to minimise the burden on Member States and soil managers.

Ion Codescu also highlighted that the Impact Assessment identified knowledge gaps that need to be addressed through research under the Soil Mission. Because of these gaps, the proposal foresees that the **Commission evaluates the proposal and its outcomes as soon as possible**. Based on the assessment of EU soils and progress in sustainable soil management, the Commission will determine if progress aligns with the 2050 target and will have the opportunity to revise the Directive.

You can find the main legal text of the legislative proposal as well as its annexes on the [Commission website](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/soil/).



Statement by Maria Arena

MEP **Maria Arena** introduced the panel discussion by expressing her support for the Commission's proposal and underlining the importance of creating a framework to adequately protect European soils. She pointed out that the Commission's proposal highlights the sensitivity of this issue, and that it is crucial to strike a balanced approach while emphasizing that a strong and ambitious proposal is very much needed.

"We understand that the Commission has to work in a balanced way to make this proposal be accepted by Member States. But we need to have a proposal that can remain ambitious and deliver a better state for our soils."



Maria Arena

MEP

Socialists and Democrats

Panel discussion



Lara Fornabaio

Clean Air, Water and Soil Lead
ClientEarth



Lukáš Baďo

Third Secretary in the Agriculture and
Fisheries department
Slovak Permanent Representation to the EU



Bart Vandewaetere

VP Corporate Communications and ESG
engagement
Nestlé



Marion Picot

Secretary General
European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA)

During the panel discussion, the four panellists shared their expectations and provided recommendations regarding the Soil Monitoring Law proposal. The discussion was moderated by Sergiy Moroz, Policy Manager for Water and Biodiversity at the EEB.

When asked about the needs of farmers, **Marion Picot, Secretary General of the European Council of Young Farmers**, stressed that young farmers will have to take care of soils for the next decades. The proposal must address soil degradation on the one hand, but also soil consumption and land take on the other. Furthermore, existing data gaps need to be filled so that farmers are aware of the potential of their soils, involving not only carbon sequestration, but also other soil functions, such as water retention capacity.

Lara Fornabaio, Clean Air, Water and Soil Lead at ClientEarth, highlighted that the proposal lacks binding targets and mandatory plans. While she wel-

comed the fact that access to justice is addressed, she also emphasised that the governance structure and access to justice provisions must go hand in hand. When there is an act with clear obligations in addition to access to justice provisions, it is possible to go to court and challenge that act.

Lukáš Baďo, Third Secretary in the Agriculture and Fisheries department of the Slovak Permanent Representation to the EU, stressed that there can be no food security without healthy soil and that soil deserves the same protection than water and air. For this reason, Slovakia, together with several other environment and agriculture ministers, initiated a joint letter in autumn 2021 calling for better harmonisation of soil legislation. While the Slovak Republic is overall positive about this proposal and looks forward to discussing it in the Council, several concerns must be addressed, for example those linked to financial burdens and the cost of monitoring.



Bart Vandewaetere, Vice President for Corporate Communications and ESG engagement at Nestlé, said that Nestlé, much like young farmers, heavily depends on agricultural soil. He stressed that living soils are directly linked to improved incomes, also for farmers. However, it is crucial that the necessary investments are made, and that de-risking is shared. Therefore, private investments must be additional to public ones.

When opening the debate to audience questions, Kristine De Schamphelaere,

Policy Officer for Pesticide-Free Agriculture at PAN Europe, asked how pesticide residues are included in the soil health assessment. She explained that pesticide mixtures in agricultural soils are the rule rather than the exception, underscoring the urgency of better assessing the impact of these mixtures on soil biodiversity. In response, Ion Codescu noted that Member States have to select organic contaminants to be monitored, which may include pesticide residues.

Closing statement

MEP Martin Hojsík closed the event by emphasising that the European Parliament will make every effort to ensure productive negotiations before the European elections. He highlighted the crucial role of soils for our society, stressing that “no pollinators will make their nest in dead soils”. He pointed out that we have neglected science for way too long and that this is an opportunity to say as of today: no more.

"We do this event today, the day that the Commission published the proposal. This full room signals a lot of interest of stakeholders. We don't agree on everything, but we agree on one thing: this law has been long overdue and we are happy to have it."



Martin Hojsik
MEP
Renew Europe



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