

The new EU Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience: a data-driven approach towards healthy soils

Brussels, July 5, 2023 — The European Landowners' Organization (ELO) welcomes the commission's proposal on the new soil monitoring and resilience directive and the recognition of European soils' diversity, complexity and mystery, particularly when it comes to soil biodiversity. Therefore, we support the focus on the improvement of data and their interpretation. We also appreciate the flexibility that comes with a directive, a flexibility that should also be granted to land managers.

Healthy and productive soils are the foundation of our land-based sectors. Its sustainable management can have an important impact to mitigate climate change, even if the increasingly erratic climate change impacts on soils also need to be considered. The recognition of the role of landowners in the sustainable management of soils is a valuable step towards soil health and the provision of related ecosystem services. Land managers play a pivotal role in the journey towards soil health, and it is crucial to consider their experience and address their concerns when designing solutions.

Towards healthy soils by 2030

Improved data collection is one of the main objectives of the soil monitoring law. This is the right approach, rather than focusing on a regulatory framework with underdeveloped data and unknown cost-effectiveness. The idea of a soil health monitoring framework based on soil districts, is a good way to gather qualitative data. However, these soil districts should be defined well and take into account not only governance and land characteristics but also ownership of land. Property rights must be respected and data ownership aspects must also be considered.

Moreover, while acknowledging the need for optimising nutrient flows, the ELO expresses concerns about the emphasis on a maximum value and the limitation to phosphorus, as plant nutrition and nutrient access is a significant issue in soil management. A shift towards circularity in nutrient flows would be a good approach, focusing on nutrient losses and adopting a result-based approach while also taking into account other nutrients. This includes enhancing monitoring for potential losses, promoting precision farming, and sharing best practices.

The ELO agrees on the need for general soil health indicators at EU level to ensure a level playing field. It is important to define indicators based on the latest scientific evidence. Targets and benchmarks should be soil-specific, reflecting different ranges for different soil types based on their land use. Principles for successful soil assessment and monitoring include a science-based approach, recognition of field and land-use specificities, involvement of field actors, practicality and ease of use for practitioners, and data ownership for field actors to adjust their practices accordingly.

Promoting Sustainable Soil Management (SSM): The Importance of Funding and Support

The soil health directive promotes a list of recognized sustainable soil management practices. This list should not be exhaustive and respect the principle of subsidiarity. A bottom-up approach is preferred, involving field practitioners and managers through voluntary measures. The success of its promotion will be dependent on the knowledge sharing and the incentives available to land managers.

While the CAP is an important instrument, regulating almost all farmland in Europe, its resources are stretched and its ambitions increasing, therefore it is important to have complementary means, such as supporting private initiatives that respect these principles. Soil health certificates can help recognise and reward land managers' efforts in maintaining and enhancing the soil health of their land, provided they are well designed. Therefore, looking at existing initiatives, a voluntary-approach and a market-based reward system should be considered. Dedicated funding for soil testing as well as the promotion of related research and more innovation, such as lighthouses and living labs, are also important. The ELO has experience in supporting and enhancing awareness of the topic by rewarding efforts made towards the environment and soil management, namely with the "EU Soil and Land management Award".

About the European Landowners' Organization (ELO)

The European Landowners' Organization (ELO) is a leading voice representing the interests of landowners, rural entrepreneurs, and rural land managers in Europe. ELO promotes sustainable land management practices, fosters innovation, and advocates for the recognition of landowners' crucial role in shaping Europe's landscapes and rural areas.

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