

IFOAM Organics Europe contribution to the public consultation on new EU Soil Strategy

IFOAM Organics Europe, the European umbrella organisation for organic food and farming, welcomes the initiative by the European Commission to update of the 2006 EU Soil Thematic Strategy to address soil and land degradation in a comprehensive way and to help achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030.

Soils are essential for the provision of food and other farm production and deliver a wide range of ecosystem services such as water purification. Farmland soils, a non-renewable resource which represents 39% of EU land, must be kept in good state or restored to be able to fulfil their function of producing healthy food. Moreover, healthy soils will be crucial to achieve the ambitious goals set out in the European Green Deal and more generally to address climate change and the biodiversity crisis.

IFOAM Organics Europe strongly encourages co-legislators to go further and propose concrete actions and legislation to improve the health of our soils.

1. Organic farming sustains healthy soils

The principles of 'Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care' are what underpins organic agriculture. Organic production rules cover principles such as limiting the use of herbicides and pesticides and promote approaches having an impact on the organic system. Most organic fields are defined by **high level of soil organic matter**, reduced irrigation and plant associations that will positively affect soil microbial community.

Cover crops, mulching and intercropping protect soils against erosion from both run-off water and wind. Organic fertilizers, minimum tillage and optimised crop rotations help the accumulation of soil organic matter (Gattinger et al., 2012), which in turn improves soils characteristics (water infiltration, holding capacities). The good soil structure of organically managed soils reduces the risk of water logging and soil erosion (Lorenz and Lal, 2016). The cultivation of legumes and green manure, often used in organic farming, also helps to fix nitrogen, and improve soil fertility. On average, **soil organic carbon sequestration tends to be higher in organic** than in conventional agriculture.

Organic management already shows important benefits for **reversing soil degradation** and has great potential to contribute to the listed objectives of the new Soil Strategy. To make full use of this nature-based approach that comes with multiple benefits also for EU Soils, further emphasis should be placed on increasing organic land in the EU by 2030.

2. Incentivizing farmers in adopting more sustainable soil management practices

Unsustainable farming and forestry practices have a major impact on habitat loss, pollution, and land degradation. Horizon Europe, regional funds and the CAP should encourage a shift towards more sustainable agriculture through both compulsory and voluntary measures. In addition, specific funding should be dedicated to best soil practices in agriculture.

Organic farming, agroforestry and other agroecological approaches enable crop production and wildlife conservation on the same land. These approaches have proven efficient for the restoration of degraded land and soil-associated ecosystem services and **should be prioritized in the CAP through Eco-schemes and Agri-Environment-Climate Measures (AECM)**.

Training and advice also have a major role to play, and the future **farm advisory services (FAS)** must be strengthened and put the emphasis on sustainable soil management. As part of the CAP Strategic Plans, Member States should set up a dedicated budget to strengthen or set up advisory services that support existing organic farmers, new entrants, as well as conventional farmers willing to convert to organic agriculture.

Moreover, as best practice evolves over time, **a network of organic demonstration farms** could collect and disseminate organic practices so that other farmers and actors gain knowledge about production rules having a positive impact on soil organic matter and soil biodiversity.

The new Soil Strategy should encourage **developing breeding strategies and models contributing to ecosystems services**, with a focus on enhanced rooting systems to contribute to soil organic matter and benefiting from interaction with soil-micro-organisms.

3. Beyond the Soil Strategy: towards legally binding actions for EU soils?

This strategy is positive step towards closing the divide left by various other legislation indirectly benefiting soil (on water, waste, chemicals, industrial pollution prevention, nature protection and pesticides), but more needs to be done to effectively protect EU soils in the future.

Indeed, the strategy alone will not be sufficient and should be complemented with legally binding acts that provide the Commission with a legal basis to ensure that CAP Strategic Plans contribute to improving the situation. Among others, Member States should list the greatest threats to their soils and come forward with priorities and encompassing soil protection measures.

A consistent framework of EU legislative and non-legislative actions on soils and soil biodiversity should covers threats that are currently not addressed at EU level such as salinisation. These new actions would also need to ensure a certain degree of flexibility to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030, as the situation of soils varies greatly from one country to another.