

Milan, 20th April 2017

Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker
President of the European Commission
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels, Belgium

Cc:

Mr. Phil Hogan
Commissioner of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr. Karmenu Vella
Commissioner of Environmental and Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

Mr. Miguel Arias Cañete
Commissioner of Climatic Action and Energy

Open letter: Request to develop a dedicated legally binding framework protecting the soil

Dear President Juncker, dear Commissioners,

we are writing on behalf of more than 500 European NGOs, research institutes, farmers associations and environmental groups, partners of the “PEOPLE4SOIL” network (complete list: www.people4soil.eu/partners). All of these bodies are committed in the European Citizens' Initiative which is targeted at introducing a specific European regulation for soil preservation.

Over the last years, **much evidence in favour of a specific legislation for soil protection has emerged**. The year 2015 – International Year of Soils declared by the UN General Assembly – generated a considerable amount of communication, as well as great boost to scientific research. This reflected an improved awareness and global concern related to land degradation, and to its consequences for our life, well-being and climate change scenarios.

The UN report 'Status of the World's Soil Resources' (2015) highlighted how the major threats to soils in Europe are those related to soil contamination, soil organic matter decline, soil sealing and land take due to urbanisation processes. Reported data is shocking:

- approximately three million sites are reported as polluted, but only around 17 000 sites have been treated;
- a Technical Report issued in November 2015 by the CE Joint Research Center and the Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research pointed out that CO₂ emissions by the EU organic soils amount to 173 Mton CO₂ per year: it means that the EU is, after Indonesia and before the Russian Federation, the World's second largest emission hotspot due to organic soil degradation, mainly induced by human activities;
- Land-use data at European level, although underestimated, display an annual trend of approximately 100.000 hectares of land lost per year because of the sprawled growth of settlements and infrastructures over greenfields.

On 25 September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, endorsing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) expected to guide the actions of the international community over the next 15 years (2016-2030). Among the 17 SDGs covered by the Agenda, great emphasis is assigned to the SDG 15, which has the target of halting and reversing land degradation by 2030, and delivering 'a land degradation neutral world'. Current evidence confirms that a third of the planet's soils are degraded. SDG15 is of great importance also for the global governance of carbon emissions. Soil is the largest terrestrial carbon sink, and contains nearly three times the amount of carbon stored in all terrestrial plants¹.

The data and facts underlined by the scientific debate and confirmed by the international consensus towards the UN Agenda are not extraneous to the problems affecting *European* soils.

In this definitely worrying picture, **the lack of a dedicated legally binding framework, fixing principles and rules to be complied with by the Member States is unacceptable.**

The recently issued 'Inventory and Assessment of Soil Protection Policy Instruments in EU Member States' (Feb 2017), commissioned by the EC, strongly supports this evidence. This study's conclusions highlight: the lack of a coherent, strategic policy framework across all EU policy clusters examined; the lack of common definitions on soil status; and, as a consequence, the impossibility of establishing targets and priorities related to conservation of soil and its functions. Furthermore, the analysis displays the lack of actions at national level. Even where the Member States have their own legislation, as in the case of soil contamination, there is a surprising spread between standards, procedures, reference values used for the assessment of the contamination status, and the remediation obligations. This situation is certainly not coherent with the objectives of an economic and political Union that should provide for uniformity of rules, ensure equal opportunities for citizens and businesses, and their consistency with a common level of protection of health and environment.

It is now clear that the prevention of land degradation and the acknowledgement of soil as a provider of fundamental ecosystem and production services, are now key conditions for sustainable development, human wellbeing, international cohesion and security in food supplies. The soil functions are widely recognised in their strategic, ecological and supranational relevance. The increased awareness and the objectives stated by the Conventions and international agreements, as well as the sustainability Agenda of the United Nations, outline the direction for national institutions and EU policies, but they are not sufficient to halt degradation in the absence of peremptory targets and binding rules. **This is clearly a gap to be filled with the tools of Community law, as well as the individual EU Member States regulations.**

Taking advantage of the celebration of Earth Day on April 22, we ask you to locate the road map for a Soil Framework Directive within the priorities of the European Commission.

¹ This evidence has also emerged in the recent World Symposium on Soil Carbon (held in Rome, FAO Headquarter, 21-23 march 2017) promoted by FAO and UNFCCC, which highlighted 'colossal' risks related to land degradation for the global climate.

Yours sincerely,

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Solène Demonet, France Nature Environnement (ECI coordinator - France)

Bernward Geier, Colabora – Let's work together (ECI coordinator - Germany)

Michael Ewing, The Environmental Pillar (ECI coordinator - Ireland)

Isabel Branco, QUERCUS (ECI coordinator - Portugal)

Stefanie Schabhüttl, Umweltdachverband (ECI coordinator - Austria)

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Bertus Buizer, Sustainable Food Supply Foundation (ECI coordinator - Netherlands)

Theodoros Oreinos, Naturefriends Greece (ECI coordinator - Greece)

on behalf of 500 European organisations: www.people4soil.eu/partners

