

Over 200,000 European Citizens sign petition calling on the EU to protect soil

The European strategies for protecting biodiversity and combating climate change should focus on soil: the EU must develop a roadmap towards a land degradation neutral world

Two years ago, the European Union signed itself up to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, taking a commitment to do its part towards a 'land degradation neutral world'.

Yet, concrete action has not been forthcoming despite almost the severe degradation soil is facing across all EU 28 member states. In Northern Europe, there is growing concern over the degradation of both organic soils and peatlands, the continued exploitation of which is causing the emission of huge amounts of carbon dioxide. In Mediterranean countries desertification, erosion and landslides give cause for great concern due to the loss of soil fertility and the potential risk to human settlements. All across Europe, huge tracts of land are subject to chemical contamination from the likes of industrial and intensive agricultural activity. Urban sprawl and the building of infrastructure on prime agricultural fields is destroying large productive lands and reducing soils' ability to absorb water from extreme weather events, increasing the risks and consequences of floods.

Although soil is facing many threats, there still isn't a specific EU law establishing shared principles and rules to halt such degradation of our precious soils.

Now, a strong public reaction to EU institutions' inertia has now come to the fore, with over 200,000 European citizens signing the 'People4Soil' petition calling on the Commission to introduce a common framework for soil protection to be applied by the Member States. The *People4Soil* European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has been supported by a network of more than 550 local organizations and groups from 26 Member States. Following a year of hard campaigning, the petition closed on 12 September, 2017 with more than 212,000 signatures from all EU countries.

Although the quorums have been reached in only two countries (Italy and Ireland), the overall number of signatures is a clear evidence that the theme of soil conservation is important for an increasing number of Europeans. Notably, *People4Soil* also gained strong support in France and Germany, both of which greatly influenced the withdrawal of the first proposal for a European soil directive in 2014 due to their opposition in the European Parliament.

In a statement, the *People4Soil* ECI committee said:

"We want Europe to acknowledge soil as its most strategic environmental resource, as it ensures food security, biodiversity conservation and climate change regulation. That is why we'll deliver the signatures to Vicepresident Frans Timmermans, requesting the Commission to locate the road map for a Soil Framework Directive within their priorities and fulfil the

international commitments. Let's take this support as the starting point to push our politicians to change national policy and to encourage our representative in the European Parliament to advocate for change in Brussels.”

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People4Soil ECI committee

info@people4soil.eu

www.people4soil.eu

T. +39 0287386480