



International Federation of
Organic Agriculture Movements –
EU Regional Group

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Working for organic farming in Europe

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Andreas Carlgren
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Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero
President of the Spanish Government
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Elena Espinosa Mangana
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Brussels, July 2009

EU Directive establishing a framework for the protection of soil

Dear President Barroso,

Dear Prime Minister Reinfeldt,

Dear President Rodriguez Zapatero,

Dear Minister Carlgren,

Dear Minister Espinosa Mangana,

I am writing to you to express my concern about the slow progress of the Council negotiations on the Commission proposal for an EU Directive establishing a framework for the protection of soil. The IFOAM EU Group stresses the need for a Common framework for soil protection in order to face the future challenges of ensuring food security, tackling climate change and halting the loss of biodiversity. Soil is a non-renewable resource; therefore immediate action is needed before even more functioning soils are irretrievably lost.

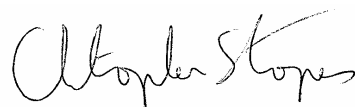
Facing the economic crisis, which is going hand in hand with food scarcities appearing in many countries around the world and the

uncertainties that climate change may cause to food security in the future, the European Union should invest more attention into one of its most important and vulnerable natural resources. Soil is the basis of food production as well as the ground for biodiversity and a complex ecological system in itself. Moreover, a healthy soil can help to mitigate climate change by carbon sequestration. But 50% of the soil worldwide are concerned or threatened by erosion, contamination, salinisation, compaction and sealing - due to industrial pollution, unsustainable agricultural practices, building activities and furthermore by the consequences of climate change. Farmers need healthy soils in order to guarantee a sufficient and healthy food supply to consumers. Agricultural techniques to prevent erosion as well as to protect and significantly increase arable soil carbon levels are already available. There is now a large body of scientific research proving that organic farming methods store substantially more carbon in cultivated soil than do non-organic farming methods.

Only nine Member States have yet established national soil protection policies. The EU needs to take the lead in developing soil protection policies if we want to see progress in all Member States. The soil framework directive was proposed by the European Commission in 2006. The European Parliament has adopted a resolution that welcomes and amends the proposed Directive already in November 2007. Since then, the directive is blocked in the Council by Germany, France, UK, the Netherlands and Austria.

The Swedish Presidency has set as one of its priorities actions to respond to climate change. The Spanish government has announced to prepare a very ambitious presidency to face the upcoming challenges. The IFOAM EU Group therefore calls on the Commission, the Swedish Presidency as well as the upcoming Spanish presidency to take a dedicated effort to bring forward an ambitious agreement on the EU Directive establishing a framework for the protection of soil in the next Council meetings, with soil protection also being a means to protect the climate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher Stopes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher Stopes, President of the IFOAM EU Group

The IFOAM EU Group is the European working level within the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. It brings together more than 300 organisations, associations and enterprises from all EU-27, EFTA and candidate countries. IFOAM's goal is the worldwide adoption of ecologically, socially and economically sound systems that are based on the principles of Organic Agriculture.

Background

Non-renewable character of soils – the European Environment Agency has assessed already in 2000 that “Soil is not renewable. Europe’s soil has a very high spatial variability: more than 320 major soil types have been identified. Each of these types supports a different range of functions and has a different vulnerability to the various pressures. Soil is, however, a limited resource, and while limited remediation of some functions can be made, soil is not renewable within the time span needed for its regeneration.”

Soil and climate change - Europe's soils contain an estimated 73 to 79 billion tons of carbon. Soil plays a huge role in climate change, because even a tiny loss of 0.1% of carbon emitted into the atmosphere from European soils is the equivalent to the carbon emission of 100 million extra cars on our roads – an increase of about half of the existing car fleet. Conversely, at today's prices, an increase in soil carbon of the same small amount would be worth some €200 million.

Soil and food security – Food production depends on the availability of functioning soils. Soil degradation is a threat to sufficient food supply. Moreover, the quality of agricultural products, especially their nutritional value, is closely linked to the quality of soil. In this sense, soil quality has a major impact on human and animal health.

Soil and water – The quality and management of soils plays a key role for the quality of both groundwater and surface waters. Water quality and availability of fresh water has been identified as one of the urgent challenges by the EU Commission in the Health Check of the Common agriculture policy.

Soil and biodiversity - Soil organisms contribute to a wide range of essential services to the sustainable function of all ecosystems, by acting as the primary driving agents of nutrient cycling, regulating the dynamics of soil organic matter, soil carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emission; modifying soil physical structure and water regimes, enhancing the amount and efficiency of nutrient acquisition by the vegetation, and enhancing plant health.

Economic crisis and soil crisis – Europe today is a net-importer of agricultural commodities. The current economic crisis shows the vulnerability of the global financial system. Together with increasing oil prices it puts into question Europe’s future ability to pay the bill for huge amounts of food and feed imported with a high input of oil and energy. This should be another incentive to put our things in order: Local and regional economic cycles for food supply are highly dependent on good soil.

Organic farming and soil - Sustainable soil management has always

been in the center of interest of organic farming. Organic farmers have developed numerous practices for maintaining and improving the quality of their soil. Enhanced soil fertility and higher biodiversity can be found in organic fields and may render these systems less dependent on external inputs. Moreover, organic farming increases the content of organic matter in the soil; therefore soils under organic farming can lock up to 1.5 tons CO₂ per hectare and year.

A legal framework for the protection of soil - Opponents to the Soil Directive argue that cleaning up soils as well as prevention measures to protect the soil would be too expensive. But soil is an indispensable natural resource for the survival of mankind, and giving an unlimited license to damage the soil by unsustainable practices to industry and agriculture would on the long term sum up a much higher bill – to be spent on decontamination of soils and measures to adapt to the consequences of climate change. This bill would have to be paid by the whole society. Moreover, irrecoverable biodiversity losses and threats to food supply and food quality would be serious consequences.

Adopting this directive would be a first ambitious step to find common solutions on how to keep this important resource viable.