

The Soil Monitoring Directive – for healthier and more sustainable soils in Europe

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In late September, the European Parliament (EP) adopted the Soil Monitoring Directive, which aims for all soils in the EU to be in good health by 2050. The measure is part of the Union's „zero pollution“ ambition and introduces a more harmonized system for monitoring soil quality, without creating new obligations for farmers and foresters. This is a key step towards healthier and more sustainable soils, which are vital for food security, clean water, and the environment.

Healthy soils for healthy food and sustainable agriculture

According to data from the European Commission (EC), between 60 and 70% of soils in the EU are in an unhealthy state – due to urbanization, intensive agriculture, and climate change. This degrades the productivity of agricultural land and increases the costs of ecosystem restoration, estimated at at least €50 billion annually.

The new law will ensure that all Member States monitor and assess the condition of their soils, using common criteria for physical, chemical, and biological indicators of soil health.

Under the directive, Member States will establish monitoring systems to assess the physical, chemical, and biological status of soils on their territory based on a common EU methodology. They will regularly report to the Commission and the European Environment Agency on the state of soil health, land take, and contaminated sites, ensuring that comparable data is available across the EU and that coordinated actions can be taken to address soil degradation. Steps will also be taken to monitor pollutants of increasing concern, such as PFAS („forever chemicals“)*, pesticides, and plastic microparticles.

The directive does not impose new obligations on farmers and land owners. Instead, Member States will need to provide support and advice to farmers to improve soil resilience and health.

Support may include training, independent advice, research activities, and awareness campaigns on the benefits of soil protection. Additionally, states will regularly assess the financial costs for farmers and foresters related to improving soil health.

Map of Potentially Contaminated Soils

Within 10 years of the directive's entry into force, each EU Member State will have to draw up a public register of potentially contaminated sites and take action if there is a risk to human health or the environment.

A watch list of emerging substances that could pose a threat to soils, including PFAS („forever chemicals“) and pesticides, will also be established.

The directive will enter into force 20 days after its publication in the Official Journal of the EU, and Member States will have three years to transpose it.

The difficult path towards a legislative framework for a Soil Monitoring Law in the EU

Although many EU legislative acts and policy instruments relate to soil protection, soils lack a dedicated legislative framework at EU level, such as exists for other key ecosystems (water, air, marine environment). In

November 2021, as part of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Commission adopted a new EU Soil Strategy, whose main objective is for all soils in the EU to be in good condition by 2050. The strategy also points to the lack of dedicated EU legislation as a major cause of soil degradation. As a solution to this issue, in July 2023, the Commission proposed the Soil Monitoring Law.

**The group of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), consisting of more than 4700 chemicals, includes widely used artificial chemicals that accumulate over time in the human body and the environment. These substances are known as „forever chemicals“ because they are extremely persistent in the environment and in the human body. They can cause health problems such as liver damage, thyroid disease, obesity, reproductive problems, and cancer.*

More on the topic:

The first European soil health law – is it on its way to becoming a reality?