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EU Council Conclusions on Farm to Fork

EU Agriculture Ministers call for special emphasis on soil organic matter to achieve a sustainable food system

The European Compost Network (ECN) welcomes the [Council conclusions](#) on the farm to fork strategy¹, that EU Agriculture ministers adopted on 19 October 2020. With these conclusions, EU ministers highlight the sustainable character of carbon storage. The Council considers with interest the Commission's intention to bring forward a new EU carbon farming initiative and to develop a regulatory framework for the certification of carbon removals. In particular, EU ministers call the Commission for special emphasis on the consequences for soil organic matter and the co-benefits for certain sustainable agricultural practices. ECN believes that a coherent policy framework which includes binding targets, incentives and measures for carbon storage will help to protect and restore soil health and, ultimately, to achieve the European Green Deal Objectives.

Soils are **essential ecosystems that deliver valuable services** such as the provision of food, energy and raw materials, carbon sequestration, water purification and infiltration, nutrient regulation, pest control and recreation. Healthy soils provide these functions simultaneously, therefore, soil is crucial for fighting climate change, protecting human health, safeguarding biodiversity and ensuring food security. Translated in political language, it means that healthy soils are a key enabler to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal such as climate neutrality, biodiversity restoration, zero pollution, sustainable food systems and a resilient environment.

However, **soil health is at risk in Europe and globally**. For instance, 12.7% of European soil is affected by moderate to high erosion, causing an estimated loss of agricultural production in the EU of €1.25 billion per year. In Southern, Central and Eastern Europe 25% of soils show high or very high risk of desertification corresponding to about 411.000 km². Large parts of Southern Europe are likely to become desertified by 2050.

To address these challenges, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030² announced the update of the EU Soil Thematic Strategy to address soil and land degradation in a comprehensive way and achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030. The updated EU Soil Thematic Strategy should contribute to the objective of increasing soil organic matter and restore carbon-rich ecosystems. However, the European Environment Agency recently concluded that **the lack of a comprehensive and coherent policy framework which includes binding targets, incentives and measures to protect land and soil** is a key gap that reduces the effectiveness of the existing policies and may limit Europe's ability to achieve future objectives³. For instance, currently there is no legal framework or incentive to increase soil organic matter, despite funding being available for creating

¹ European Commission (2020): *A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system*. COM/2020/381 final

² European Commission (2020): *Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Bringing nature back into our lives* COM(2020) 380 final

³ European Environment Agency (2019): *The European Environment: State and Outlook 2020*

Good Environmental and Agricultural Conditions (GAECs) under the Common Agricultural Policy. If no additional action is taken, there is a high risk that the EU will fail its Green Deal and international objectives.

The European Compost Network (ECN) is a crucial promoter of soil health. Thanks to the engagement of its Members, **ECN is already raising awareness of general public, industrial players and institutional actors thanks to the initiative [S.O.S. – Save Organics in Soils](#)**, developed in cooperation with the Italian Composting Association (Consorzio Italiano Compostatori). Save Organics in Soil aims to highlight the importance of soil organic matter to encourage policy makers to develop instruments to move Europe towards the implementation of sustainable, climate proof soil management practices.

The main Priority Goals of the [S.O.S. SOIL Initiative](#) are to increase soil organic matter in arable soils, encourage more efficient management of nutrients on agricultural land and protect the existing stock of carbon in soils. As a matter of fact, **a crucial indicator to verify the soil multifunctionality is the soil organic carbon (SOC) pool**. Carbon is one of the primary sources of energy in food webs; losses of carbon (through erosion, climate change, drainage of otherwise waterlogged soils) impact the supply of ecosystem services and reduce biodiversity. Biologically mediated decomposition of organic material is the fundamental process for building the soil carbon stock, which, together with clay minerals, is important for nutrient retention and cycling.

Last week, on 13th October 2020, Members of the European Parliament heard how **bio-waste can be better recycled, soil fertility maintained and climate change mitigated** at an online event organised by the ECN and co-hosted by MEP Franc Bogovič (EPP, Slovenia) and Elsi Katainen (Renew Europe, Finland). By working together, farmers, soil scientists, waste-operators, policymakers and any other interested stakeholders can ensure a better future for the next generation, where soil health is restored and conserved. The main outcome and the presentations of the panelists are available on [ECN website](#).

ECN has also developed two factsheets on 'Soil Structure & Carbon Storage' and on 'Soil Fertility & Productivity' to better inform stakeholders and policymakers about the importance of soil health. Both factsheets are available on [ECN website](#).

Contact Details:

European Compost Network

Dr Stefanie Siebert

PHONE: +49 234 438 944 7

EMAIL info@compostnetwork.info