PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release – 16 October 2020

Save Organics in Soil – Biological Cycle and Sustainable Agriculture

Members of the European Parliament exchange information with soil and compost experts, farmers and winegrowers

13 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[1] organised by the European Compost Network (ECN) 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.

During the event, panellists outlined **good practice examples of the circular economy** in action that, thanks to **the use of recycled compost, improve both the quality and health of Europe's soils and also help mitigate climate change**[2]. Compost recycled from bio-waste can be effectively used as an organic soil improver. On average, one tonne of fresh compost contains 300 kg of organic matter. Application of 30 tonnes of fresh compost per hectare per year will return nine tonnes of organic matter to the soil.

More than 80 delegates joined the webinar **'Save organics in soil – biological cycle and sustainable agriculture'**. The day showed that policymakers, economic operators, research centres and civil society share an interest in establishing an open dialogue with all key stakeholders. **Keep soil healthy**, **carbon sequestration** and **awareness raising** are the key words that emerged during the contributions and that indicate the way forward to 2030. All participants recognised that the challenges of maintaining soil quality are of paramount importance in realising the vision of the European Green Deal[3], in which Europe achieve net-zero CO_2 emissions. Soil is recognised as a means to store some of the excess greenhouse gases that our systems have not been able to abate. The operators of the agriculture sector are at the forefront of turning the challenges into opportunities and some of them shared their story of using recycled compost to offset mineral fertilisers, restore the quality of soil and close the biological cycle.

The speakers came from different sectors: policymaking; waste management; soil science; agriculture and viticulture. They were, Mr Mirco Barbero (European Commission); MEP Franc Bogovič, Mr Marco Giacomazzi (European Compost Network), Ms Jane Gilbert (International Solid Waste Association), MEP Elsi Katainen; Mr Luca Montanarella (European Commission) and Mr João Vasconcelos Porto (Sogrape Vinhos Portugal).

MEP Elsi Katainen stressed the importance for farmers to be able to access quality agronomic advisory services. The Common Agricultural Policy should provide them with funds to access knowledge to recover fertility, quality, and soil health and achieve sustainable development goals.

MEP Franc Bogovič stressed that the issue of health has been crucial in recent months and that human health cannot ignore the health of the soil. According to MEP Bogovič, food waste is one of the key challenges in the coming years and it will be important to replicate good prevention and recycling practices all around Europe.

Mr Marco Giacomazzi outlined the effectiveness of different separate collection schemes of bio-waste in several European countries, and provided data published in ECN's report 'Overview of bio-waste collection, treatment & market access across Europe (2019)'. Its analysis showed that, by 2030, collected bio-waste could increase from 48 to 128 million tonnes and that of recycled compost can rise from 12 to 32 million tonnes[4].

Mr Luca Montanarella presented the European Commission Joint Research Centre's assessment of soil health in Europe. Mr Montanarella established a link between poor soil quality, erosion, desertification and the loss of carbon contained in soil. Proper soil management is an important climate change mitigation strategy.

Ms Jane Gilbert quantified the benefits for soil of regular application of compost. The main feature of this product is that it is rich in organic matter. Once stabilized, the organic matter replenishes the fertile layer of humus in the soils. When soil is rich in humus, it can store more carbon and additional benefits materialise, such as enhanced water holding capacity; improved soil structure which reduces the risk of erosion; fostered nutrient exchange capacity which reduces the risk of nutrient loss; and increased microbial activity in soil which reduces the risk of disease. Finally, Ms Gilbert quantified the potential benefits of storing carbon in soil at between 2000 and 4500 Euro per hectare every year.

RETERRA Service GmbH presented a video in which **Mr Peter Zillikens** shared his own experience as farmer who has replaced mineral fertilization to a large extent with RAL-quality-assured compost over several years on his arable land cultivating sugar beets, wheat , barley, maize

Mr João Vasconcellos Porto showed that compost is a very useful resource in vineyards in Mediterranean areas to counteract the effects of droughts and ensure a quality harvest while respecting biodiversity and preserving soil quality.

Mr Mirco Barbero reported that maintaining soil quality is one of the priorities of the European Green Deal and Biodiversity Strategy. He called on all participants to take part in the consultation to update the Thematic Soil Strategy which is expected to be published on the European Commission's website (https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say) by the end of 2020.

Ms Kristel Vandenbroek, Chair of the European Compost Network, summarised the workshop by concluding that soil is a natural carbon sink whose conservation is crucial to mitigate climate change. Soil can store up to 3.5 million tonnes a year of CO_2 when compost is regularly applied in combination with other soil management practices. Therefore, the implementation of separate collection of bio-waste across Europe[5] is crucial for providing high quality compost which can be used to restore soil health, quality and carbon. Policy makers are asked to set ambitious targets and on soil health by

2030. Sustainable and best practices already applied in Europe's agriculture and viticulture should be recognised to boost their scalability and replicability.

After more than 40 years of environmental policies and discussions on climate change, it should no longer be surprising that the business as usual models cause unsustainable costs for the climate, the environment and human health. All political, economic and social actors should act together to develop and experiment with alternatives that enable resources to be recovered and restored. A successful strategy aims to conserve and respect the biological cycle. 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.

Finally, Ms Kristel Vandenbroek invited the participants to sign the manifesto 'Save Organics in Soil' of the S.O.S. Soil initiative: **https://www.saveorganicsinsoil.org/**[6]

The programme and the presentations of the event can be assessed here.

###

Notes to editors:

1. The online event was organised as partner event of the EU Green Week (19-22/10/2020)
2. Many areas in Europe show worrying indicators about soil health and quality. 'Depletion of organic matter', 'contamination', 'high risk of desertification' and 'water or air erosion' are terms that are commonly used to describe the state of the soil in Europe.
3. In 2019 the EU Commission published the European Green Deal (COM(2019) 640 final) which provides an action plan to boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean, circular economy and to restore biodiversity and cut pollution
4. Bio-waste plays a key role in sustainable waste management. Bio-waste accounts for the largest fraction (40%) of municipal solid waste. Today only 30% of bio-waste across Europe is collected separately and recycled in a sustainable way by composting and anaerobic digestion. There is potential to collect separately and recycle more than 128 million tonnes of bio-waste to be recycled annually, resulting in 32 million tonnes of compost. ECN Status report 2019 'Overview of bio-waste collection, treatment & market access across Europe'.
5. In 2018 the European Union has published the revised Waste Framework Directive. Article 22 states that: "Member States shall ensure that, by 31 December 2023 … bio-waste is either separated and recycled at source or is collected separately and is not mixed with other types of waste."
6. For background information on the sustainable use of compost and digestate to improve soil organic matter, please find a series of ECN fact sheets here.

Contact Details:
European Compost Network
Dr Stefanie Siebert
PHONE: +49 234 438 944 7

EMAIL: info@compostnetwork.info