

Environment plan 'downgrades' soil ambitions amidst broken promises
and delay culture, experts warn

Environmental Improvement Plan another 'Missed Opportunity' says Alliance

All hopes of meeting England's 2030 healthy soil targets have been dashed by Government delays and broken promises, and the "re-packaging, re-spinning and regressing of a critical environmental target", a coalition of the UK's leading soil experts said today.

The warning from the Sustainable Soils Alliance comes with the publication of the Environmental Improvement Plan – heralded as the government's comprehensive delivery plan for halting and then reversing the decline in nature.

Director of the Sustainable Soils Alliance Matthew Orman said: "Since 2021 a series of government ministers promised us an Action Plan for England's soils. Then we were told that the Plan would be subsumed into the Environmental Action Plan. Now the EIP has been published and it is hugely disappointing - just a re-packaging, re-spinning and regressing of a critical environmental target.

"In fact, the only new announcement of note within the plan is the significant downgrading of ambition - from making all England's soils sustainably managed by 2030, to just 60% of soils on farms by the same date.

"A genuine action plan could have been the opportunity to address this - to demonstrate the ambition, investment and clarity of vision needed, but instead all we got is a series of half-baked ideas, disjointed ambition and the repetition of existing piecemeal policies."

SSA Founder, Ellen Fay, said: "Back in 2017, then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Gove, tasked the Sustainable Soils Alliance with holding the government to account on soils, and our report card is damning. In fact the last action plan for soils in England was published in 2009 – by a Labour government!

"Since then, 13 years of Conservative rule and we have no vision, no commitment of investment – not even a definition of 'sustainably managed soils', or what this means in practice - despite the fact that our soils underpin the health of just about every other aspect of the natural environment.

"We know our soils receive a dismal fraction of attention and investment compared to other parts of the environment. An action plan for soil would have finally put a stop to all that."

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Notes:

- The Sustainable Soils Alliance was set up in 2017 to unite fragmented interests to create an inclusive soil community and a single compelling case for urgent soil restoration to prevent flooding, mitigate the effects of climate change and promote national food security. It aims to restore Britain's soil to health within a single generation by working with scientists, innovators,

policymakers, farmers and other land managers to promote political and public appreciation of soil and build powerful coalitions of support. In 2017, then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Gove, publicly tasked the Sustainable Soils Alliance to *hold government to account on soils* [Rt Hon Michael Gove's address to the SSA launch. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3xGJEpZopE&t=165s>].

- September 2021 Lord Goldsmith announces Soil Health Action Plan for England [<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-09-08/debates/962D384A-3300-47A2-A2C3-9A9CFFD84050/EnvironmentBill>]
- Stakeholder consultations due to start in 2022, but after numerous set-backs it is announced in January 2023 SHAPE will be included in The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) [<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-12-19/HL4404>]
- Key soil facts:
 - It is estimated that in the UK, soil is being destroyed 10 times faster than it is being created. [WWF, 2015 <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/sustainable-future-soils-and-water>]
 - Soil degradation in England and Wales costs an average of £1.2bn/year [Graves *et al* 2015, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800915003171>]

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