



Sustainable Soils Alliance thoughts -

*On the **State of the Environment: Soil** report*

released by the Environment Agency on 3 June 2019

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, soil health has united politicians and campaigners on both sides of the debate as one of the great potential environmental beneficiaries of leaving the EU. It is seen as an unmissable opportunity to take ownership of all aspects of our national soils policy. This will help us meet the target enshrined in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment of sustainably managed soils by 2030.

This Environment Agency report provides historical context in support of this view. Farming legislation under the Common Agricultural Policy prioritised food production over environmental concerns while the abandonment of the European Union Soils Framework Directive created a policy vacuum. Meanwhile, at a national level, investment in national and local farming advisory services, soil training and enforcement has declined dramatically in the space of one generation.

All of these factors contributed to the situation described in this report whereby soil's ability to carry out essential environmental services is under serious threat. Across the board the signs are worrying. Soil's role in carbon storage, flood prevention, food production and as a home to biodiversity are in jeopardy. Soil degradation is both a driver and an indicator of climate change.

So the need is there and the timing is right. Indeed we have before us an opportunity almost unique to an industrialised nation to build from scratch a joined-up, fit-for-purpose national soil policy. This should reflect the scale of the problem and the political intent. We should seize it while harnessing the potential of technology and the groundswell of commitment in soil health among many farmers, land managers and policy makers.

But what kind of policy is needed? All environmental governance depends upon the careful interweaving of key policy levers: regulations, education, incentivisation, monitoring and enforcement. The unique characteristics of soil such as its variety, ownership, timeframe and constituents represent a very particular challenge requiring careful consideration.

A clear regulatory baseline is needed to outlaw the most damaging practices, which requires adequate capacity to ensure enforcement. This depends upon education of land managers about the legal consequences of poor soil management, but also the environmental and productivity benefits of best practice. Investment in an army of soil-expert advisors is needed to drive this, and to develop the whole-farm plans which will unlock potential public funds. Nationwide and on-farm monitoring are needed to establish whether policies and practices are working, and to measure the direction of change over time.

Understanding the role and interaction of these individual policy levers will also be key to estimating the cost of achieving sustainable soils for the public purse. The price of soil degradation in England and Wales is estimated at £1.2 billion per year, but what is less well understood is the cost of remediation. The component parts need to be clearly defined, with a clear demonstration of the value they add, if the cost is not to appear as excessive.

At our recent soil-specific parliamentary debates, hosted by Rebecca Pow MP, ministers have given us reasonable grounds to believe there is a strong government commitment to delivering soil health. There are encouraging references in the Agriculture and Environment Bills, and in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment. We would now like to see this converted into detailed targets and concrete investment. Above all, there should be the kind of commitment to genuine strategic thinking we have seen in recent years given to air and water.

These examples, and more recently plastic pollution and biodiversity decline, show that with the right approach both awareness and behaviours can change very rapidly. A similar injection of cross-governmental economic and political will is needed to trigger a generational shift in appreciation of soil. We urge this and future governments to keep soil sharply in focus in the critical years of agri-environment policy making that lie ahead. We commit to collaborating closely with them on this task.

Matthew Orman, Director, Sustainable Soils Alliance - June 2019