



**European Economic and Social Committee**  
**The President**

Brussels, 23.05.2012, Charlemagne building

**Green Week 2012, Session on Soil & Water**

**Staffan Nilsson's key note speech**

*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
—————  
*Check Against Delivery*

I feel honoured and grateful for having been invited as a key note speaker to this session of the 12th edition of the Green Week.

I would particularly like to thank the European Commission, DG Environment for giving the chance to the EESC to participate in this session on soil policy.

We, the European Economic and Social Committee, are particularly delighted to be involved in the debate today, as the issues of water management and the protection of our soil are highly interlinked and feature high on the political agenda, both in the context of environmental policy and in the frame of the common agricultural policy.

As you well know, we are the EU body representing organisations of employers, employees, farmers, consumers, and other civil society stakeholders. In the European decision-making process, our main role is to advise the other European institutions on legislative proposals and important matters of European interest.

Indeed, with the new Lisbon Treaty we can have an even greater influence on the internal workings of the Union. Civil society organisations have been given the chance to express their views and to engage in open, transparent and



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regular dialogue with the European institutions, while the Committee has been encouraged to develop its relations with CSOs.

The added value of our activity consists of bringing together different, sometimes controversial interests, and succeeding to speak with one voice, informing the decision makers of what civil society expects and what impact legislative decisions will have on society.

Now, let me say a few words about Committee's main views on the issue of soil policy.

Soil is crucial to our livelihoods, as it supplies us with food, fibre, fuel and raw materials. We certainly consider it to be an issue of strategic importance, and not only as an environmental issue but also as a **key element of sustainable economic growth in Europe**.

The theme of sustainability is one of the key elements of my Presidency's programme, and the EESC will actively continue the efforts to tackle this topic of vital concern at local, European and global level.

Soil is rapidly degrading in many places across the EU exacerbated by human activity, such as industrial activities, tourism, urban development, transport infrastructure and certain agricultural and forestry practices. In particular, I would like to point to the problem of soil sealing, which significantly decreases the soil's ability to retain water, and in turn, contributes to increased flood levels. In this context, the EESC welcomes the recently published Guidelines on best practice to limit, mitigate or compensate soil sealing.

Different EU policies already contribute to soil protection but no coherent policy exists. Only nine Member States have specific legislation on soil protection, often covering a specific threat, in particular soil contamination.

Soil degradation has strong impacts on other areas of common interest of the EU, not in the last place on water, but also on other related areas such as: human health, climate change, biodiversity protection, and food safety.

I would like to address also the issue of soil protection in the context of the EU agricultural policy, given my background as an active farmer. I will highlight its



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relation to the quantitative and qualitative protection of water resources in the EU.

As it is broadly accepted, good agricultural and forestry practices maintain and improve the soil. Unsustainable agriculture on the other side can accelerate water and wind erosion, drain soil of organic matter and cause loss of soil fertility. For example, overgrazing by cattle and use of heavy machinery can cause soil compaction, and irrigation can lead to salinisation and water logging.

Therefore, the Committee has underlined on various occasions the need for a sustainable use of soil in agriculture, in order to maintain healthy soils and increase productivity, while avoiding erosion, compaction, and decline in biodiversity.

Everything depends however on the expertise and technology used in soil management. By definition, when farmland is used for food production, natural land has been taken for cultivation purposes. Consequently, some impact is unavoidable.

The impact on farmland depends on annual seasonal variation and climate, but this does not mean that industrial substances, erosion, humus concentration, etc., must be accepted. Normal agricultural activity, using the expertise that we have today, can in fact help to maintain and enhance soil quality. Few entrepreneurs take such a long-term approach to both investment and soil management as farmers and foresters.

This high level of awareness of soil protection among farmers should be supported and complemented by advisory systems as well as voluntary measures and incentives.

In this context, I would like to recall the close connection between soil protection and water quality. Soil and vegetation, which act as a rainfall buffer, are of fundamental importance for the state of water ecosystems. To this end, we need to focus on the most serious problems and threats to soil, especially land use changes, soil sealing and pollution - which directly affect hydrological cycles, the state of water ecosystems, and surface and groundwater quality.



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Water use in agriculture is gradually becoming more efficient (more "crop per drop") but needs to improve further through, for example, modernisation and more sparing use of watering and irrigation. In this context, I would like to stress the **need for deepening and developing research and new technologies in agriculture** (such as creating plant varieties which are more resistant to drought).

Practices in farmland use and development planning can have a major impact on water scarcity: uncontrolled use exacerbates groundwater or surface water exploitation and can cause irreversible environmental damage and establish a cycle of unsustainable socio-economic developments – putting food and energy security at risk. Future spatial planning policies need to accommodate water-related constraints.

While we have made progress in greening the CAP in the past, we have the possibility to make an important leap with the upcoming CAP reform for 2013. We need to increase the quantity of support for environmental and water measures, to pay farmers for supporting Green Infrastructure and water quality, while making funds conditional on effective management of water resources through environmental cross-compliance and agri-environmental measures.

Furthermore, the Committee calls for soil-related standards to be established or further clarified in the context of the overall CAP reform, including an obligation not to plough wetlands and carbon-rich soils. Rural development programmes under the 2nd pillar should include objectives of sustainable management of resources, and climate mitigation/adaptation including by means of soil management.

The Committee is strongly in favour of adopting the previously proposed Soil Directive, in order to address the need for systematic monitoring and protection of soil quality across Europe in an effective and coherent way. Likewise, I would like to point to the revision of the **Sewage Sludge Directive**, as it is one of the mainstays in soil protection for agricultural land and for ensuring that contamination by dangerous substances does not increase. The EESC has repeatedly called for the introduction of minimum requirements for soil protection in using sewage sludge in agriculture.



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The EESC advocates integrating social dialogue. Given its constitutional role, the Committee further tries to stimulate the debate through ongoing exchange of experiences and good practices between regional/local actors and organised civil society. We have to share our knowledge and experiences aimed at:

- a better service to our citizens,
- a better management of the resource, and
- a better protection of our environment.

Thank you for your attention!



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