

## PRESS RELEASE

### EU Soil Policy Dialogue calls for coordination, efficient and farmer-centred implementation to improve soil health and soil monitoring in Europe

**Brussels, 19 January 2026.**

As the European Union moves from soil policy ambition to implementation, a growing challenge is no longer whether soil health matters, but how existing policy frameworks can work together effectively on the ground.

This question was at the centre of the EU Soil Policy Dialogue, held on 19 January at the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels and organised by the Horizon Europe project BENCHMARKS. More than 200 participants – including 56 attending in person and 145 joining online – came together to explore how soil health and soil monitoring can be strengthened across EU and Member State policy frameworks in a way that is coherent, efficient and workable for farmers and public authorities alike.

Bringing together European Commission services, Member States, farmers, researchers, civil society organisations, Mission Soil projects and private-sector actors, the Dialogue created space to map overlaps, identify gaps and explore alignment opportunities across four key policy frameworks shaping Europe's approach to soil and environmental outcomes: the Soil Monitoring Law (SML), the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Carbon Removals Certification Framework (CRCF) and the Nature Restoration Law (NRL).

Participants highlighted that while these instruments pursue different objectives, better coordination at the implementation stage could reduce administrative burden, improve consistency, and accelerate soil health outcomes across Europe.



*“Soil health policy doesn't fail because of a lack of ambition. It fails when the system becomes unreadable for the people expected to implement it. This Dialogue showed that coordination, translation and trust are not 'soft' issues - they are the infrastructure that makes soil health policy work on the ground.”*

**Fabio Volkmann, Climate Farmers Academy, BENCHMARKS**

## EU policy updates: a shared emphasis on implementation

The morning opened with updates from the European Commission on the state of play of key EU soil-relevant policy frameworks. Mirco Barbero (DG ENV), Valeria Forlin (DG CLIMA) and Emmanuel Petel (DG AGRI) outlined how the Soil Monitoring Law (SML), the Carbon Removals Certification Framework (CRCF), the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Nature Restoration Law (NRL) are moving from policy design towards implementation.

Mirco Barbero highlighted that the SML is designed to establish a common, long-term reference for soil condition across the EU, while explicitly allowing Member States to build on existing monitoring systems and datasets. He highlighted that the focus is on creating a shared baseline that supports learning and comparability over time, rather than imposing rigid or one-off measurement requirements.

From a climate policy perspective, Valeria Forlin outlined the latest developments under the CRCF. She emphasised that credibility and uptake will depend on robust monitoring methodologies, transparent data flows and consistent quality criteria. She underlined that early decisions on measurement approaches will shape how soil-based carbon removals are perceived, trusted and used by both public and private actors.

Emmanuel Petel discussed how soil monitoring relates to eco-schemes and CAP implementation choices, stressing the need to align monitoring requirements with existing farm practices and reporting systems. He highlighted that avoiding duplication and ensuring proportionality will be essential to maintain farmer engagement and administrative feasibility.

The Nature Restoration Law was referenced as part of the broader EU policy context in which soil health objectives are increasingly relevant, alongside climate, biodiversity and agricultural policies. Its interaction with other frameworks was explored further in the interactive sessions later in the day. Across the discussion, panellists converged on a shared message: while each instrument serves different policy objectives, effective delivery will depend on coordination across frameworks, alignment of data and indicators, and clearer links between EU-level design and Member State implementation. The panel reflected a broader shift from setting new ambitions towards making existing EU policies work together coherently in practice.



*“Soil health is essential to addressing Europe’s biggest challenges — from climate change and biodiversity loss to food security and human health. These are not separate issues. When soils are degraded, they become part of the problem; when they are healthy, they can be part of the solution.”*

**Mirco Barbero, DG ENV**

## Member States underline need for harmonisation and shared learning

A second panel brought national and regional implementation perspectives into the discussion, highlighting how soil monitoring and soil-related policies are currently organised across Member States.

Representatives included Marco Dimech (Director, Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, Malta), Světlana Chovancová (Deputy Director for Research and Development, VÚMOP, Czech Republic), Martien Swerts (Senior Advisor, Government of Flanders, Belgium) and Pascale Picron (Service public de Wallonie, responsible for the Walloon Nitrogen Action Plan, Belgium).

Panellists described how responsibilities for soil monitoring are distributed across ministries and agencies, where institutional leadership sits, and where bottlenecks remain. Despite differing national contexts, common challenges emerged, including fragmented governance structures, unclear sampling and reporting mandates, and limited capacity at regional and local levels.

Participants underlined that stronger cross-Member State collaboration could accelerate shared learning, reduce duplication and support more consistent implementation of the Soil Monitoring Law and related instruments, while respecting national specificities.



*“These regulations are complex, and it’s important that there is a strong advisory structure on the ground to help farmers and administrations navigate this landscape.”*

**Marco Dimech, Ministry for Agriculture, Malta**

## Farmers call for practical, fair and outcome-driven monitoring

A dedicated farmer panel brought field-level perspectives from across Europe into the policy dialogue. Meghan Sapp (Curly Creek Ranch, Spain), John Gilliland (Brook Hall Estate, Northern Ireland), Indigo Janka (Edelgart, Germany) and Géraud Dumont de Chassart (Ferme de la Sarte, Belgium) shared how soil health objectives and monitoring requirements translate into day-to-day farm management.

Across very different farming systems – from mixed livestock and arable rotations to market gardening and large-scale cropping systems – panellists underlined that soil monitoring systems will only gain traction if they deliver clear value on the ground. In particular, farmers stressed that monitoring must be:

- Robust enough to inform better farm management decisions, not only to meet reporting obligations;
- Site-specific and economically viable, recognising the diversity of soils, systems and regions, as well as the additional costs borne by farmers in delivering soil health outcomes;
- Fair to farms of all sizes and production models, avoiding bias towards larger or more capital-intensive operations;
- Designed to minimise additional administrative burden, especially where farmers already face multiple and overlapping reporting requirements.

Several speakers emphasised that where farmers are asked to deliver public benefits beyond productivity – including climate mitigation, biodiversity and water regulation – monitoring and transition costs should be adequately supported through public funding and complementary private mechanisms. Without this, there is a risk that the burden of implementation falls disproportionately on early adopters.



*“If soil monitoring doesn’t help me make better decisions on my farm, it won’t be used — no matter how good it looks on paper.”*

**Meghan Sapp, Curly Creek Ranch, Spain**

Farmers also cautioned that data collection should support their learning journey towards healthier soils, rather than create frustration or lead to unintended financial penalties. Monitoring systems, they argued, should help farmers understand where they are starting from, track progress over time, and adapt management accordingly – not simply assess compliance against narrow indicators.

Participants were also informed about the 2026 Regeneration Week, organised by the European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture (EARA), as a complementary initiative to further amplify farmer-led perspectives and peer-to-peer learning in the soil health transition. Further details can be found [here](#).

## Multi-actor Dialogue sessions: coordination, translation and efficiency

The afternoon dialogues explored practical challenges and solutions. These included connections between the four EU frameworks, ways for more coherent monitoring, and for translating policy outcomes from EU level to Member States to farmers.

Participants consistently pointed to the importance of:

- Coordination across policy frameworks, institutions and data systems;
- Harmonisation in sampling, descriptors, data formats and procurement;
- Translation between levels of governance and knowledge communities; and
- Efficiency to reduce administrative burden and avoid duplication.

Participants/experts/actors also surfaced the growing importance of a shared language for soil health across policies. They also highlighted the need for clarity on what different frameworks aim to achieve, measure and incentivise.



*“Farmers don’t experience policies one by one. They experience the system as a whole - and when monitoring, incentives and reporting don’t line up, trust and uptake are lost.”*

**John Gilliland, Brook Hall Estate, Northern Ireland, Advisory Member BENCHMARKS**

## Mission Soil projects, research tools and value chains bridging policy and practice

The afternoon sessions highlighted how Mission Soil projects, applied research, digital tools and value chain initiatives can jointly support the transition from EU soil policy ambition to implementation on the ground.

Luis Sanchez Alvarez (European Commission, Mission Soil) outlined how Mission Soil and its portfolio of projects are designed to act as a bridge between EU policy objectives and real-world delivery, supporting Member States, regions and practitioners through shared learning, testing and scaling of solutions.

Building on this, Carmen Vázquez (Wageningen University & Research; BENCHMARKS) presented the BENCHMARKS Soil Health Indicator Framework and the Soil Steward dashboard, which aims to translate complex soil health concepts into comparable, practical and decision-relevant indicators across farming systems and policy contexts. BENCHMARKS was presented as both a research project and a neutral facilitation platform, supporting dialogue between policymakers, scientists and land managers.

Complementing this, Ishani Wheeler (AI4SoilHealth / OpenGeoHub Foundation) demonstrated how digital and geospatial tools can support soil monitoring by integrating in-situ measurements with remote sensing, improving data accessibility and enabling more informed decision-making while avoiding unnecessary duplication.

From a market and value chain perspective, Lucy Smith (One Planet Business for Biodiversity – OP2B) emphasised the importance of clear, aligned and credible soil monitoring approaches for companies and farmers alike. She highlighted how value chain actors can support uptake and investment when policy signals, indicators and monitoring requirements are coherent and farmer-centred.



*“We see soil health as the capacity of soil to act as a living system and support the delivery of multiple ecosystem services at the same time. Monitoring only works if it is clearly linked to objectives and adapted to context.”*

**Carmen Vázquez, Wageningen University, BENCHMARKS**

## Emerging knowledge gaps and technical questions

Beyond governance considerations, participants identified technical questions and knowledge gaps that Mission Soil and Member States might consider. These include approaches to:

- Creating and combining measurements that are cost effective, accurate and comparable across soils and regions
- Ensuring data flows efficiently with INSPIRE and emerging Mission Soil infrastructures (e.g. SoilWise);
- Protecting farmers confidentiality while enabling transparency for research and progress tracking;
- Making monitoring outputs intelligible and useful for farmers and advisors.

While technical solutions are advancing, participants agreed that the main challenge now lies in integration – across policies, actors and data systems.

## Next steps & opportunities to engage

Building on the outcomes of the EU Soil Policy Dialogue, BENCHMARKS invites participants and interested stakeholders to continue the collaboration around practical, science-based soil health monitoring and implementation.

### **Develop fit-for-purpose soil health MRV systems**

BENCHMARKS supports public authorities, value-chain actors and initiatives in designing robust, science-based Monitoring, Reporting & Verification (MRV) systems that are proportionate, context-specific and aligned with EU policy objectives.

Interested organisations can express interest in collaboration or tailored support here:

<https://soilhealthbenchmarks.eu/monitoring-reporting-verification-support/>

### **Engage with validated soil health personas**

To support shared understanding and policy–practice dialogue, BENCHMARKS has developed a set of soil health user personas, co-created and validated with stakeholders. These personas help translate policy and monitoring concepts into user-relevant realities and are openly accessible:

<https://ecoenvai.ijs.si/benchmarks/soil-steward/personas/>

Stakeholders beyond the BENCHMARKS consortium are invited to contribute to the external validation of these personas via a short survey:

<https://forms.gle/Gsap8Sfne4cq5vFe7>

### **Explore stakeholder perspectives on soil health**

Participants are invited to access the Soil Steward Insights Explorer, an interactive tool presenting results from the first 21 BENCHMARKS stakeholder workshops across Europe. The tool captures how different actors understand soil health, objectives and challenges across regions, land uses and policy contexts.

<https://ecoenvai.ijs.si/benchmarks/stakeholder-insights-explorer/>

### **Open invitation for collaboration**

The BENCHMARKS consortium welcomes follow-up exchanges with policymakers, Member States, farmers, researchers and value-chain actors interested in advancing coordinated, farmer-informed soil health monitoring across Europe.

## **About BENCHMARKS**

BENCHMARKS is a Horizon Europe project supporting the operationalisation of soil health across Europe through user-centred, science-based monitoring approaches. The project works across scales – from farms and cooperatives to regions and ministries – to co-develop soil health indicators, benchmarks and MRV systems that are credible, comparable and usable in practice.

The BENCHMARKS EU Soil Policy Dialogue was jointly implemented by Climate Farmers Academy, Wageningen University & Research, UNEP-WCMC, and the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF).

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