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## **TAUW position paper on the new EU Soil Strategy**

### **TAUW and Soil**

TAUW is a European consultancy and engineering firm with a strong position in environmental consulting and the sustainable development of the living environment. From offices in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, we work with more than 1,200 dedicated employees for a beautiful, clean, safe and sustainable living environment.

TAUW welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to address soil related threats. In addition to the on-line consultation, TAUW has drafted this position paper to better reflect its opinion, based on our enduring experience as a consultant in environmental services in general, and in soil and land management in particular. TAUW is a member of and a contributor to various national and international platforms and professional associations on sustainable land management. In addition, as soil practitioners working for industry, public authorities and other stakeholders, but also as informed citizens of the EU, we will continue to contribute to our EU environmental quality to have healthy and resilient soils for future generations: it's not just a daily job, but a living ambition!

This position paper reflects the opinion of a representative group of soil practitioners, ranging from strategic consultants and specialists to young professionals within our soil community, all with a passion for soil.

### **Why our position paper**

Soil is literally and figuratively the foundation of our very existence - yet mankind does not treat it as such. As soil practitioners, we believe that, like surface water, groundwater and air, soil is an important environmental topic. Our EU soil needs a dedicated framework at a European level in order to restore the ecosystem services they provide, prevent further deterioration by threats such as loss of organic carbon, loss of soil biodiversity, excessive land intake and contamination and also help us mitigate and counteract climate change. These threats are currently poorly addressed at a European level, due to the lack of a common EU strategy and definitions. To have a resilient and vital future for our world, political involvement addressing threats to soil is needed.

This paper is intended as our statement of support to a European initiative on prevention and reversal of soil & groundwater degradation.

**Critical items to be addressed at EU level**

It is our opinion, that, in principle, a new EU Soil Strategy should concentrate on sustainable land management, not considering soils as one distinct component of the environment, but as a central element, vitally linked to the other components (air, water, biosphere, human society, etc.).

Existing legislation often deals with only one or a few functions of soils, whereas the new EU Soil Strategy should achieve an overview, creating harmony between existing regulatory instruments related to soil and groundwater, and emphasizing the topics that are not addressed yet (gaps or grey zones) with regulation at the EU level.

We would like to point out that groundwater should be fully included in the scope of the Soil Strategy. Polluted soils, whether the pollution be diffuse or isolated, can greatly impact large groundwater bodies and have significant impact on human health or environment. Indeed, we consider that the soils, the sub-soil and groundwater compose a unique system, with interconnected matrices. In general, a common European framework of goals and definitions reflecting this holistic approach of the soil should provide a level playing field.

Related to the assessment of soil health, a common list of well-defined and comparable parameters to describe the soils and their functions, shared with EU countries and administrations, should be developed and implemented. This will enlarge the vision of stakeholders, raise awareness about the fragility of this medium, and lead, hopefully, to a better consideration of certain ecosystem services. With extensive monitoring comes the opportunity of sharing environmental data on public platforms (within the same framework for all European countries), and the necessity of a common methodology to assess the quality of soils, that should evaluate the correct completion of soils functions and define criteria for "a vital soil". We want to point out that there is need for uniformity across Europe pertaining to the collection and interpretation of data that becomes available after monitoring.

The EU aims to provide a framework for identification, preservation and restoration of soils by providing common goals and definitions. Under this framework the EU should not only encourage member states to remediate polluted sites, but also develop a guideline for excavated soil. In addition, soil sealing should be minimized to preserve biodiversity, soil structure and composition. This would ensure proper functioning of the soil ecosystem and provide services to the environment and human society (fertility, water management, resilience towards climate change are topics of high importance in this regard).

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We stress that when intervening on damaged land, or when developing a human activity into an area, we should go one step further: from dealing with the presence of contaminants or shaping the topography, to restoring a whole ecosystem with its function. Preservation of current and future soil functions and biodiversity should be mandatory across the EU. This vision is fully aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations, and especially with the goal 15 “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”, and the target 15.9 “Integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts”.

### **A living ambition**

TAUW strongly supports the initiative of a new EU Soil Strategy. We hope the EU will succeed in creating a level playing field and establishing a common framework, goals and definitions to promote and achieve a resilient and future proof soil ecosystem. We suggest regulating this at an EU level, but to maintain room for country specific rules while establishing common EU goals and definitions.

At TAUW it is our daily practice to bridge problem owners and other stakeholders’ understanding and needs related to land use. As such, we would welcome the opportunity to use our experience and contribute to making the Soil Strategy and subsequent regulations or guidelines applicable and attainable.

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