

Global Soils: EU

European Soil Protection Strategy*

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In June 2002, the ministers of environment of the 15 member states of the European Union agreed on a baseline paper entitled: Towards a soil protection strategy in the European Union, (Document number COM(2002)179 final), laying the foundation of the further development for a European soil protection.

With this basic publication, soils were recognised for the first time to be an important environmental medium, such as air and water.

As a follow-up of this basic agreement on soil protection, the Directory General for Environment of the European Commission was asked to take the lead in order to find ways for an implementation of soil protection in Europe.

For the soil policy development, a new organisational set-up was created, distinguishing between a steering group, called Advisory Forum, chaired by the Directory-General of Environment, which unifies members nominated by the European countries, and members of important stakeholder groups, NGOs, scientific institutions, in total about hundred persons who are all steering the whole process (Fig. 1).

This Advisory Forum is accompanied by a Commission in the form of an inter-service working group and, under both organisational groupings, a technical co-ordination secretariat is chairing five working groups, which are again composed of country representatives, and representatives of important European NGOs and scientific-technical institutions (see Fig. 1).

Within the soil thematic strategy, 8 main threats to soils were defined, which are:

erosion, decline in organic matter content, contamination, sealing, compaction, decline in biodiversity, salinisation, and floods and landslides.

The five working groups cover all the threats and the working groups on monitoring and research also have to cover cross-cutting issues, such as co-ordination, creation of awareness in the public, and others.

The working group on soil monitoring has a clear mandate to support the development of a proposal for a soil monitoring directive in Europe until mid-2004. The other working groups have to deliver results which support the European Commission to take active steps in soil protection in the near future, including research targets for soils.

The reporting of the working groups must be based on the DPSIR-approach (Driving forces, Pressures, State, Impact and Responses), thus allowing them to connect soil issues with economic, social, cultural, technical and environmental constraints and impacts.

In the working group for research, the main targets are:

1. to define the actual knowledge in the field of the 8 threats;
2. to define how far the available research results are used for policy and decision making, and if not, what the constraints are in these areas;
3. gaps in scientific and technical knowledge, regarding soil under a broad angle.

For this whole process, a step-by-step approach is used, starting with the first meeting of the Advisory Forum in April 2003 in Brussels, two meetings of each working group in between and a second meeting of the Advisory Forum in November 2003 in Brussels, for reporting about the progress in the discussion of the respective working groups, which are sub-divided in task groups for covering specific aspects within the overarching issues.

Two more meetings are scheduled for the working groups, in late 2003 and early 2004, before they report again to a third Advisory Forum. After this, a concluding working group workshop will define the results which will be used for final reporting to the European Commission in May/June 2004.

* Here you can find information on the development of EU soil policy: <http://forum.europa.eu.int/Public/irc/env/Home/main>

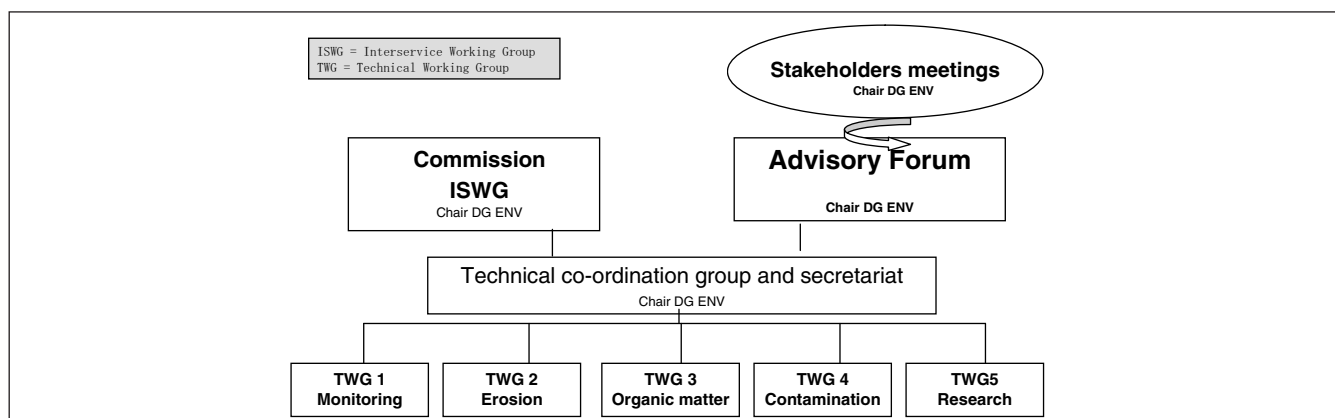


Fig. 1: Soil policy development, organisational set-up