

SUMMARY

Soil is the basis for farm productivity and the health of ecosystems. The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) still lacks clear guidance on measures to improve and monitor soil health. With current soil health decline and the impact of agriculture on climate change and the environment, we urgently need to put soil at the forefront of agricultural policy.

SoilCare investigates and promotes the use of Soil-Improving Cropping Systems (SICS) to improve soil quality for positive effects on sustainability and profitability. SICS are a holistic approach to soil management, consisting of long crop rotations and an 'integrated' combination of inputs and management techniques. Here we present how SICS can act as a cross-cutting mechanism to improve soil health through CAP, RDP, GAECs, AECMs and multiple agri-environmental framework directives.



Woodchip amendments



Diverse cover crops

POLICY OPTIONS

Studies have shown several ways that policies can motivate farmers to take on better environmental and soil health management. The following options can increase uptake of soil health practices:

- **Build SICS clearly into CAP Pillar I as cross-cutting farm practices for public goods**
- **Increase facilitators for farmer information exchange and training for advisors in soil health practices (e.g. via Farm Advisory Services)**
- **Use SICS to cross-cut policy frameworks and directives: e.g. cover crops to address both the Water Framework and Nitrogen Directive**

**SICS
could help
Member States
to create adequate
minimum standards
for soil related
goals**



Incorporating SICS into EU policy

Agricultural Policies

The proposed post-2020 CAP includes three overarching environmental objectives which directly relate to soil and therefore provide opportunities for its incorporation more strongly via SICS:

- Contribute to climate change mitigation, adaptation and sustainable energy
- Foster sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources like soil, water and air
- Contribute to the protection of biodiversity and enhancing ecosystem services

Within CAP's Pillar 1 instrument, the incorporation of greening measures into compulsory Good Agricultural Environmental Conditions (GAECs) offers a greater chance for soil protection. These include using cover crops as a part of the rotation; acting as protection from erosion and adding nutrients. Cover crops are also a key part of SICS. In the Pillar 2 instrument, the new agri-environment climate measures (AECM) pose opportunity to address current declining soil health; soils regenerated through SICS can become carbon stores and mitigate climate change effects. It must be ensured that Member States allocate enough of the transferable Pillar 1 & 2 budget to soil health measures. Key to this will be having the long-term vision proposed by the European Commission and used in SICS.



Knowledge exchange

SICS

example

Cover crops with reduced N fertiliser

Improves:

Soil structure, biodiversity, nutrient use efficiency; leaching & erosion

Frameworks and Directives

The Frameworks and Directives in the table overleaf can be addressed jointly by using several SICS components. Efforts therefore need to regulate and incentivise their uptake by farmers through increasing awareness and facilitation of farmer groups working together at a landscape scale.

Withdrawal of the Soil Framework Directive means that EU soil policy remains without coherent legislation to address the issue of soil in its own right. Within the EU, only a few countries have a specific legislative or policy instrument with soil protection as a primary goal. European soil degradation is increasing, indicating that current policies are not effective. Farmer uptake is key and may be adversely affected by poor policy and advice, as well as socio-economic and environmental factors. See more info here: <https://www.soilcare-project.eu/resources/deliverables>



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