



Submission to the Labour Policy Forum Consultation

March 2023

1. Background

Soils are the foundation of both our food system and the natural environment. UK soils provide over half of the food we eat and are home to a quarter of all biodiversity. These services are threatened, with 2.9 million tonnes of soil currently being lost in England & Wales every year and soil erosion, flooding, water pollution and carbon loss caused by degraded soils costing an estimated £3.55 Billion a year.

2. Policy context

Healthy soils lie at the heart of a number of priority policy areas:

- *Resilient food supply* - Recent food shortages highlighted the fragility of the food supply system and our dependence on imports. Healthy soils are vital for maintaining sustainable domestic production.
- *Cost of living crisis* - Farmers have been hit harder than most by the rising cost of living through increased fuel and input costs. Regenerative soil management can help bring down costs and provide a source of income for farmers through carbon markets and a premium on produce.
- *Climate change* - Last year's drought demonstrated the threats soils face. Healthy soils are both more resilient to the effects of climate change and a critical part of the solution because of their ability to sequester carbon.
- *Greener Britain* – The pollution of our rivers is of growing public concern. Sustainable soil management prevents erosion and enhances soil's ability to store and filter pollutants before they enter watercourses.

3. Policy gaps

It is clearly within the government's mandate to develop policies to address the issues above, and yet there are gaps across the board:

i. Strategy

The last major soils policy initiative came in 2009 under a Labour government, including the commitment for all of England's soils to be sustainably managed by 2030. This year, the Conservatives downgraded this target to just 60% of agricultural soils, and abandoned the promised Soil Health Action Plan for England.

ii. Regulations

There is currently no soils-specific regulation in the UK. Existing protections come from the Farming Rules for Water, which have soil as a secondary consideration, and Cross Compliance which is being phased out. The Rules themselves are inadequate, poorly communicated and lacking enforcement. On average, farms can be expected to be visited by the Environment Agency only once every 50 years.

iii. Incentives

Without a clear regulatory framework, Environmental Land Management is seen as the main mechanism for achieving sustainable soil management but alone will not achieve the industry-wide change in behaviour needed:

- *Financial:* Current payment rates are inadequate – they don't reflect the costs involved or the true ecosystem value of healthy soils. There is no transparency about how these rates were decided.
- *Results:* There is no vision as to how long-term environmental objectives will be either achieved or measured by the scheme, making it hard in turn to justify the public expenditure on the scheme.

iv. Advice and education

The lack of consistent guidance on soil management for farmers, advisors or other critical stakeholders is a symptom of longstanding neglect in agricultural education. Investment would be an opportunity for upskilling farmers.

4. Our asks

We recommend that soils to be recognised as a key aspect of Labour's green growth strategy. This should include:

- *An overarching soil strategy- to unite the currently fragmented aspects of soil policy around a consistent approach to on-farm monitoring, that can then cascade into regulations, incentives and education*
- *A soil-specific regulatory framework- that reflects the threats soils face and the services they provide, and that is adequately communicated and enforced*
- *Adequate financial Incentives for soil management - that reflects both cost to farmers and the vital ecosystem services soils provide*
- *Rigorous standards for ecosystem market places - that will pave the way for farmers to derive economic and environmental benefits from their soil management*
- *Protection for farmers from unfair supply chain pressures- by strengthening the power and scope of the Grocery Code Adjudicator*
- *A well-resourced, independent farming advice service capable of translating the latest science and technology into practice*