

Briefing Note to Support Soil Specific Amendment to the Environment Bill ***House of Commons: Consideration of Amendments***

The Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA), Soil Association and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust are urging MPs to support [Amendment 2](#) to the Environment Bill, tabled by Baroness Bennett, which places “*soil health and quality*” as one of the Bill’s priority areas for the setting of long-term environmental targets. Peers voted to pass the amendment 209-166.

This amendment represents a watershed moment for our climate and environment, by giving the Government the power to set a legally binding long-term target on soil.

The list of things we cannot achieve without fixing our soils is long – from meeting our Net Zero targets, preventing floods and droughts, to bringing back healthy rivers, farmland wildlife and ensuring future food security. However, as currently worded, soil is not a priority area in the Bill and there is no time frame according to which a soil target will be set.

Soil’s absence from the list of priority environmental indicators is a major setback. As originally drafted, the Bill’s priority areas were listed as air, water, biodiversity, resource efficiency and waste reduction – but not soil. Soil has been neglected as a policy priority for decades despite widespread evidence that UK soils are degraded, which represents a major barrier to climate and other environmental targets. The historical lack of a nationwide soil target has meant no imperative to report on its changing health, and thus no investment in its long-term monitoring or management.

Soil is currently enjoying significant, even unprecedented attention – thanks to its inclusion in the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), the rise of the Regenerative Farming movement and the announcement of the creation of a Soil Health Action Plan for England. However, without a nationwide legally binding target to align these initiatives, and to give soils the high priority they need, soils will continue to get the short straw when it comes to finance and policy efforts.

It is also important for the Environment Bill to join up with related matters. This means supporting the Agriculture Bill which authorises the Secretary of State to fund “*protecting or improving the quality of soil*” and the National Food Strategy chapters 7 (Food and Climate) and 14 (Food Security), which makes the critical link between soil health and food production.

The 25 Year Environment Plan’s deadline of 2030 by which sustainably managed soils should be achieved is less than a decade away, so every year between now and then will count - not just because a target will unlock the necessary policy and investment commitment, but because it will send a clear message to farmers and industry who are eagerly awaiting government leadership to help them shape their own soil management targets. With that in mind, we urge MPs to give soil the urgency it so critically needs by supporting Amendment 2 to the Environment Bill.

The rationale for including soil as an environmental priority in the Environment Bill:

1. Achieving the Government's commitments in the 25 Year Environment Plan

- The government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#) includes the commitment for England's soils to be sustainably managed by 2030. The Environment Bill will give the power to set legally binding long-term targets on aspects of the natural environment, so in order to achieve this fast-approaching 2030 goal, soil health must be listed as a priority in the Bill.

2. Aligning the Environment Bill with the Agriculture Act

- The 2020 Agriculture Act included a firm commitment to use public funds to protect and improve soil. To reverse the degradation of our soils and return them to a healthy state nationally, a commitment to monitoring at both the farm and national level is needed. It is critical that these two pieces of legislation align.

3. Investment in monitoring is required to establish a soil health target

- The lack of available data on soils has arisen due to inadequate funding into soils monitoring and research. Only by placing soil as a priority area can we ensure that this situation is reversed. Without it, there is a serious risk that Defra budgets remain constrained for soils. Soil must be placed in the Bill to ensure a target is set within an adequate time frame and for the government to be held accountable for its delivery.
- The [SSA's freedom of information request](#) revealed that, unlike for water and air, no single policy instrument exists to improve and protect soils and only around 0.4% of England's environmental monitoring budget is spent on soil.
- The current lack of information and knowledge about our soils is not an adequate barrier to the development of a target. Lord Goldsmith admitted himself in the HoL that "*developing targets is an iterative process*". Targets can (and should) be developed, evolved and finessed over time. Clause 1(2) requires only that the government "*set a long-term target in respect of at least one matter within each priority area*".

4. Soil health is integral to achieving other environmental objectives

- Soils' status will determine the outcomes of the Government objectives, including climate mitigation, flood-risk minimisation, water-quality measures, biodiversity and policies relating to food production – many of which are prioritised in the Bill.
- Lord Goldsmith [acknowledged](#) soil's importance in meeting climate change objectives "*we cannot get to net zero without addressing soil*". A 2030 biodiversity target would equally rely on soil health.

5. Soils are under threat

- The UK loses more than [3 million tonnes](#) of topsoil every year and almost [4 million hectares](#) are at risk of compaction. A 2020 review of UK studies found that [16%](#) of arable farms had soil erosion so high that it was a threat to future food production.
- The volume of plastic contamination of soils is [likely to be as great, if not greater](#), than plastics entering watercourses. Contamination and pollution affects their fertility, biology and structure, and results in negative consequences for the ecosystems they support.
- [A quarter](#) of the world's biodiversity lives in soil.
- An estimated [9.8 billion tonnes](#) of carbon are stored in Britain's soils. Whilst soil carbon sequestration can increase this amount, badly managed soil can be a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.
- In the [advice](#) given to the government by the Adaptation Committee of the Climate Change Committee on the climate risks faced by the UK, three of their eight urgent priorities are to do with the impacts that changing climate has on soils.

Annex

Amendment 2

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle's amendment In Clause 1

In Clause 1, Page 2, line 4

at end insert—

“(e)

soil health and quality.”

This amendment would place soil health and quality at the heart of the Bill, properly recognising it as a priority area for environmental improvement in the Bill.