

Industry collaboration on soil health needed to achieve Net Zero and biodiversity targets
New research calls for industry leadership and shared metrics, research and ambition

A report published today by the Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) has called for greater collaboration between major UK food retailers and manufacturers to address soil management throughout their supply chains in order to meet Net Zero, biodiversity and sustainable farming aims.

The report makes a strong case for collaboration between businesses, and to enable this, the SSA is creating the Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP), a forum for knowledge exchange, co-operation and the development of a pan-industry commitment on soil health. Businesses included in the research are being invited to join the SHIP, which will launch in February 2022.

The research, published ahead of World Soils Day this Sunday and weeks after COP 26 highlights agriculture's role in addressing the climate and nature crises, and identifies over 50 business-led initiatives that directly or indirectly influence soil health. The report concludes they would not deliver lasting, measurable impact without a more ambitious, strategic, collaborative and targeted approach.

The analysis identified clear gaps in process, ambition and investment that need to be filled if the businesses involved were to realise critical environmental commitments relating to Net Zero, biodiversity and sustainable agriculture, including:

- A lack of scrutiny and understanding of how sourcing pressures – short term contracts or seasonal demands - might inadvertently be causing soil damage – or safeguards in place to prevent this.
- A lack of consistent metrics, performance indicators or shared research to show which farming interventions are delivering environmental outcomes and how.
- A lack of collective leadership driving high environmental standards across the sector, or clear messages to farmers about long-term supply chain expectations and support.

The report sets out five recommendations to food and drink businesses, underpinned by 15 suggestions for action. The recommendations include the following (full list in Editor's Notes).

1. Ensure food businesses are not contributing inadvertently to increased soil degradation and decline. Use all mechanisms (advisors, contracts, certification schemes) to embed regulatory compliance and safeguards against soil-damaging practices into supplier relations.
2. Show commitments are real, tangible, traceable and measurable. Develop metrics and performance indicators that connect corporate regenerative ambitions with on-the-ground projects - and regularly and publicly report on progress against them.

In announcing the report, SSA Director, Matthew Orman said: *“COP26 and the government's Net Zero strategy have laid bare farming's critical role in delivering Net Zero and biodiversity targets. Healthy soil is vital for achieving these goals, however concrete actions and targets are thin in the ground. This is where the major food brands need to step in - to leverage their expertise and buying power to help farmers transition to sustainable soil management.*

“As this report shows, a great deal of work is underway, but as it stands these are piecemeal, siloed and won't make a tangible contribution without more ambition, collaboration and strategic approach to ensuring they deliver against critical targets. However it did also reveal considerable interest in the subject and a willingness to collaborate, and we look forward to working with the whole food industry to turn the report's recommendations into reality.”

The report was funded by the Tesco/WWF partnership. Speaking about the report, Callum Weir, Sustainable Agriculture Specialist at WWF said: *“The rationale for greater collaboration between businesses that depend on soil for the products they sell couldn’t be more clear. Soil improvement is incremental, non-excludable and reversible – the benefits are spread between farmers, land-owners, retailers, manufacturers and the environment in general, while on the flip-side, decades of good work can be undone in a very short space of time. Only through close collaboration and cooperation can we achieve Net Zero targets.”*

Anna Turrell, Head of Environment at Tesco said: *“Manufacturers and retailers are increasingly aware of the importance of soil not just for food production and security, but also a host of critical environmental outcomes – in particular, the delivery of Net Zero. This report plays a vital role in highlighting the levers available to food businesses regarding soil management, as well as the need and opportunity to do more. We look forward to working with the SSA and industry partners in taking this agenda forward –driving best practice and providing consistent metrics to farmers and the rest of the industry.”*

Note to editors

- The Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) was launched in 2017 to address the current crisis in our soils. It campaigns for soil to be placed at the heart of post-Brexit farming and environment policies - including regulations, incentivisation, guidance and advice.
- Initiatives identified by the research included financial incentivisation of specific land management interventions, the generation of guidance, collaboration with research bodies, access to advisors and in-field research.
- Of the businesses analysed, 20 commit to supporting sustainable agricultural practices and 23 have Net Zero commitments as part of their sustainability ambitions. 13 refer specifically to soil health within these commitments under the brand of ‘regenerative’.
- The research is based on engagement (letter, survey, workshop) with 25 businesses that have the largest footprint/impact on UK agriculture practices, supplemented with web-based research. Over 75% of the businesses polled responded to the correspondence throughout July and August 2021.
- The report was funded by the Sustainable Agriculture Workstream of the WWF-UK and Tesco Partnership. The partnership aims to halve the environmental impact of the average UK shopping basket by focusing on three key areas: helping customers to eat more sustainably, restoring nature in food production and eliminating waste.
- The report concluded with 5 recommendations to businesses:
 - a. Ensure you and your intermediates suppliers are not contributing inadvertently to increased soil degradation and decline. Use all mechanisms (advisors, contracts, certification schemes) to embed regulatory compliance and safeguards against soil-damaging practices into supplier relations.
 - b. Show your commitment is real, tangible, traceable and measurable. Develop metrics and performance indicators that connect corporate regenerative ambitions with on-the-ground projects - and regularly and publicly report on progress against them.
 - c. Make the most of available and future research. Ensure it translates into practice change on the ground as widely as possible.
 - d. Be a catalyst for system-wide change. Spread ambition and best practice throughout the industry both vertically – via intermediaries that source on your behalf - and horizontally to competitors and hard to reach/invisible supply chains.
 - e. Anticipate and address farmer needs at a time of great uncertainty. Demonstrate alignment with policy-makers, market forces and other drivers through whole system thinking, consistent metrics and leadership.

For media enquiries or to set up interviews before the report launch on Friday contact Anicée Defrance on 07465 404456 or anicee@sustainablesoils.org.