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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Council

Subject: Dialogue on the future of soil protection in the EU and its potential to help achieve the goals of the European Green Deal (Brussels, 27 April 2022)
- Information from the Slovak delegation

Delegations will find in the Annex a note received from the Slovak delegation on the event mentioned in the subject, to be dealt with at the session of the “Agriculture and Fisheries” Council on 24 May 2022.

Dialogue on the future of soil protection in the EU and its potential to help achieve the goals of the European Green Deal (Brussels, 27.04.2022)

In April 2021, the European Parliament adopted its Resolution on Soil protection calling for an EU-wide legislative framework. In mid-November 2021, the European Commission presented its highly anticipated Soil Strategy for 2030, which amongst a number of actions included an intention to publish a Soil Health Law in 2023. The Soil Expert Group started its discussions on the future legal framework in February 2022.

Based on all of these factors, Slovakia organised a Dialogue on the future of soil protection in the EU and its potential to help achieve the goals of the European Green Deal in Brussels on the 27th April 2022. The main aim of the event was to initiate an exchange with policy makers, experts and stakeholders on the future of soil protection in the EU, also with a focus on the future Soil Health Law. Soil is not only an integral part of our lives, but a necessary one, which is why it needs the same level of protection as water and air.

The event started with Slovakia's keynote speech on "Soil as the water and carbon storage of the country", exploring the possibilities of increasing the use of some of the soils functions for carbon capture as well as for higher water retention.

Next, the Commission presented its Soil Strategy for 2030 from November 2021, which includes numerous actions related to soil protection, most importantly the Soil Health Law. The Commission also highlighted elements of the CAP, that will lead to a higher soil protection in the upcoming period.

The first panel consisted of policy makers from the Commission (DG ENVI and DG AGRI), Member States (Czechia and Slovakia) and the European Parliament (COM ENVI). The discussion was focused on the importance of soil protection and sustainable management to achieve the goals of the European Green Deal and explored the future of soil protection in the EU. During the very constructive discussion, many aspects were highlighted, such as the importance of soil for citizens, our planet and in the fight against climate change. There was a consensus that there is a need for a more ambitious and harmonised approach to soil protection and its integration into other policies and strategies. The importance of subsidiarity and proportionality also needs to be taken into consideration. One of the key preconditions of a successful implementation of soil protection measures is the uptake by land managers and sufficient financial incentives. The panellists also highlighted the importance of sustainability, which should become the “new normal”. They agreed on the necessity of a European legal framework, whereas the Member States will play a crucial role in this process. Other than soil protection, the framework should also cover the maintenance and restoration of soils.

The second panel consisted of experts from Member States (Germany and Slovakia), as well as representatives of the Commission (DG AGRI and JRC). The discussion focused on issues faced in relation to soil protection and management from various perspectives, such as data collection, practical implementation in Member States and the role of innovation. The panellists highlighted some of the shortcomings in soil protection caused by the lack of awareness on soil, harmonized approach within the EU and explored the limitations of finding a common definition of soil health.

In general, the event emphasized that more needs to be done on the EU level in terms of soil protection, as well as when it comes to advisory services and training for land managers on soil protection and management, soil research and innovation and to educating citizens about the importance of soil. The future Soil Health Law was one of the main topics of discussion with a wide support from the participants, which gave guidance on elements that should be included in the future legal framework.