

Parliamentarians for Agroecology

Parliamentary Briefing: Agroecology and Soils

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Healthy soils absorb and store water more effectively, reducing flood risk and helping crops withstand drought. They reduce reliance on costly inputs and support stable yields over time. Investing in soil health delivers multiple benefits at once: economic resilience for farm businesses, greater food security, and wider public goods such as cleaner water and climate mitigation.

Seen through this lens, soil functions as the bank account of both farm businesses and the nation as a whole. For too long, returns have been drawn down without sufficient reinvestment, leaving the system more vulnerable to shocks. Rebuilding that natural capital isn't optional if we want farming and the wider economy to hold up over time.

Crucially, the responsibility for that investment cannot sit with farmers alone. Farmers operate within policy frameworks, market pressures and supply chains that often reward short-term output over long-term resilience. If society expects affordable food, clean water and thriving landscapes, then the costs and risks of delivering those outcomes must be shared.

Why soils are important to agroecology

Agroecology provides a practical framework for transforming the UK food system by applying ecological and social principles to farming, recognising the interconnected relationship between land, food and communities, supporting biodiversity, soil health, climate resilience and rural economic growth, while promoting fairer supply chains and farmers' roles as land stewards.

Healthy soils provide the vital foundations of agroecology, but agroecology recognises that soil is more than simply a growing medium. It is the key building block of farming and national resilience. It underpins productivity, regulates water, stores carbon and buffers farms and communities against climate extremes. Like any important asset, it delivers returns only when it is protected and replenished. With the right framework, investment in soil health can underpin food security, strengthen rural economies and help Britain adapt to a more volatile climate.

Policy intervention for healthy soils

Restoring soil health requires a stable, long-term policy framework that gives farmers confidence to invest in soil-building practices. It also requires private markets to play a clearer role in rewarding the environmental value created on farms, whether through supply chain incentives, water stewardship schemes or credible natural capital markets. Consistency and clarity from Government are essential if those markets are to develop at scale.

However, as it stands, there is no concerted strategy for English soil. Soils sit across a range of fragmented policy mechanisms – water regulations, Environmental Land Management Schemes, nature markets, and ecosystem monitoring frameworks. Many of these treat soils as an afterthought rather than a strategic priority. Soils need clarity and a statement of intent. Above all, farmers need confidence in the direction of travel. Constant redesigns (as we are seeing with the Sustainable Farming Incentive), short pilots and shifting priorities undermine trust and discourage ambition. Where there is long-term clarity - simple schemes, regulatory clarity, sound advice and

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reliable payments - farmers are far more willing to invest time, money and expertise in building resilient systems.

Policy Asks

We recommend that the following policy recommendations be adopted as part of a coherent and targeted policy framework for England's soils. Many of these were reflected in the recommendations that emerged from the 2024 EFRA Inquiry into soil health.

1. The reinstatement of the Soil Health Action Plan for England, promised by the previous government, drafted and then subsequently shelved.
2. A robust, soils-focused regulatory framework underpinned by a commitment to long-term enforcement and communication. This should fill the regulatory gap for soil and target the restoration and protection of the country's most damaged and vulnerable soils.
3. The establishment of a high-integrity, robust private market for ecosystem services that drives soil health as well as carbon and nature outcomes. This should explicitly bring supply chain investment into scope, as well as from businesses (water, insurance, banking, technology) that benefit from resilient soils in the landscape.
4. The government's Environmental Land Management Scheme should be used as the vehicle to establish a universal 'language' of soil health, built on consistent, but not uniform metrics, standards and principles to reflect the diversity of soils, land-uses and climatic conditions.
5. The government should address the fragmented nature of soils guidance and advice by promoting the development of resources that can be delivered by qualified and accredited trainers and via peer-to-peer learning to increase uptake of soil improving practices.
6. Free and open access to the national soil classification and soil maps of England and Wales. This publicly funded resource is currently the only consistent, universal resource for describing and understanding the whole soil profile to 1m depth, but needs to be made more accessible and understandable by farmers and other stakeholders.

Why are soils important for the government's ambitions?

Healthy soils are critical to achieving 4 of the 5 environmental priorities identified by the DEFRA Secretary of State in 2025.

- Sustainable soil management drives cleaner waterways through increased water holding capacity, erosion prevention and the capture and filtration of pollutants before they enter watercourses.
- Healthy, well-structured soils act as 'natural flood management infrastructure' - while poorly managed soils increase the severity and likelihood of flooding.
- Healthy soils are critical for domestic food production and our nation's overall food security, which has been brought into the spotlight by global conflicts and the uncertain effects of climate change.
- The complex interaction between soil life, plants and soil chemistry and physics are essential for nature recovery, as well as the cycling and storage of carbon from the atmosphere.

Written in partnership with the Sustainable Soils Alliance, www.sustainablesoils.org

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