

DECLARATION

Sustainable Land Use and Soil Protection – Joining Forces for Nature, People and the Economy



Bearing in mind that

1. Soils are the basis of our life and a precondition for all human activities

Soils are a living and dynamic medium at the interface between the geological subsurface and the atmosphere. Soils are an essential resource for all human activities, especially the production of healthy and secure food as well as of agricultural and silvicultural commodities. Hence, soils are not only a central basis for food sovereignty and prosperity but for all life.

2. Soil functions are essential elements of ecosystem services

Soils are multifold biotopes; among other functions soils serve as flood protection, they filter and buffer contamination, protect ground water, can help to protect the climate through carbon sequestration, preserve mineral resources and are the source of genetic resources. They archive elements of natural and cultural history, serve as water reservoir and provide the basis for the production of human food, animal feed and renewable raw materials.

3. Soils are a limited and vulnerable resource

Soils, being a thin layer, can be destroyed easily, but they take a very long time to regenerate or require high efforts to be restored; this applies especially to mountainous areas. Degradation of soils affects all sectors of human activities and may jeopardize the further development of entire human cultures. In this respect, land ownership embraces rights as well as obligations and responsibility.

4. Land use and soils face specific challenges in the Alpine region

The core Alpine area is subject to specific challenges such as a heavily limited permanent settlement area and productive land, sometimes combined with an increasing demand for space for traffic, housing, economy and leisure implicating soil sealing, considerable pressure on sensitive ecosystems, immissions of air pollutants, tangible effects of climate change like increased erosion and mass movements, substantial discrepancies in demographic development at a small spatial scale, short vegetation periods, land abandonment on the one hand and intensive land use on the other hand. In the metropolitan and agglomeration areas housing is scarce and expensive, which causes commuter flows and problems with individual traffic.

5. Sustainable land use and soil protection require cross-border co-operation

Soils are considered as immobile. However, pressures on soil have both local and global drivers. Their impact can be local (e.g. loss of fertility), transboundary (e.g. transport of sediments and contaminants due to erosion) or global (food security, climate change and health). The example of floods, which directly depend on soil conditions in the water catchment area and have impacts on soils in the flooded areas, shows that soil-related issues transgress regional and national borders. Hence, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, trans-border cooperation on various levels, including by specialists from different fields and different organizational structures, as well as better harmonization of data collection can make a significant contribution to sustainable land use and soil protection.

6. Soils require our best efforts to apply the relevant normative documents

Sustainable land use and soil protection are subject of various international, European, national and regional normative documents of varying legal nature. This encompasses, in particular, the Soil Conservation Protocol of the Alpine Convention, which is legally binding upon the European Union and its Alpine Member States, as well as the UN-Sustainable Development Goals (2, 12 and 15), EU Soil Thematic Strategy and the EUSALP Action Plan.

and working closely together with the Alpine Convention, represented through its Presidency and Secretary General, we the representatives of the States and Regions in the territory of the European Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) adopting this declaration intend to cooperate towards sustainable land use and healthy soils:

1. Apply and enhance the implementation of existing regulations

Different regulations directly address careful land use as well as qualitative and quantitative soil protection at sectoral, regional, national, European and international level, such as the Protocols of the Alpine Convention, in particular the Protocols on Soil Conservation, on Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development, on Nature Protection and Landscape Conservation, on Mountain Farming and on Mountain Forests. All these regulations need to be consistently applied and effectively implemented, or specified, where necessary. The efforts for reducing land consumption and enhancing soil protection are primarily tackled in a cooperative manner.

2. Coordinate and improve data collection and monitoring systems

The qualitative and quantitative data on soil and land use currently available is heterogeneous and incomplete. Therefore, we recommend a rapid harmonization of these data taking account of existing efforts. The States and Regions in the territory of EUSALP intend to cooperate to improve their monitoring systems for user-specific requirements, e.g. through building land assessments, surveys on sealed surface per inhabitant, registration of still unexploited areas also as a reference for assessing changes, permanent soil observation areas. In this connection the assessment, based on harmonized data, of soil functions in all planning procedures and projects regarding soils seems to be a necessary approach to counterbalance non-rational land use and to preserve soil functions.

3. Foster inner-urban development and plan infrastructure and mining prudently

The mobilization of inner-urban reserves of building areas, the use of the existing building stock and brownfields and keeping the development of human settlements and commercial and industrial facilities within given boundaries offer manifold positive effects, such as efficiently using existing resources, reviving urban and village centres, strengthening pedestrian and bicycle traffic due to shorter distances, protecting agricultural land in the surroundings, preserving natural areas for relaxation as well as protecting the climate. Quantitative and qualitative soil conservation can likewise be implemented through a forward looking provision of transport and energy networks and leisure and tourism facilities, through space-saving construction, just as through a cautious extraction of raw materials, which enables subsequent usages. For these purposes, appropriate existing and new instruments will be applied wherever possible, such as land management, intermunicipal cooperation, surveys and management of vacant or under-

utilized buildings, land consolidation, the calculation of infrastructure costs, measures increasing the attractiveness of urban and village centres, incentive schemes for reactivating inner-urban brownfields for unsealing and appropriate redensification, remediation of contaminated sites, soil-saving planning of transport and energy networks and of leisure and tourism facilities as well as prudent planning and re-cultivation of mining sites.

4. Encourage awareness raising, capacity building and experience exchange on sustainable land use and soil protection

The awareness of the broad public concerning the value of soils, land consumption, soil sealing and sustainable land use needs to be raised through activity oriented communication and intensification of networking activities of well-known actors and new target groups. Capacity building and experience exchange on practical success stories regarding sustainable land use and soil protection will be promoted among all age groups and all levels of action (schools, academia, administration, politics, agriculture, technical experts and other stakeholder groups).

5. Facilitate and live participation

The involvement of all concerned and interested stakeholder groups, in particular of local decision makers and land owners, ensures a comprehensive tackling of the complex issues of sustainable land use and soil conservation, shared proposals and the implementation of broadly accepted decisions. To this end, different sections of the local population, representatives of the interests of land users and non-governmental organizations will be engaged in continuous local/regional/national/cross-border participation processes. Such processes shall involve the youth and applying the principle of multi-level governance with a strong involvement of municipalities.

6. Establish and strengthen regional, national and cross-border co-operations

Sustainable land use, resource-conscious spatial planning and soil protection are closely connected to many sectors of human life. Successful measures at all levels require contact persons able and willing to co-operate in various constellations. We will actively encourage co-operation through pertinent activities, such as supporting the newly established Alpine Soil Partnership, promoting mountain farming and forestry and its cultural heritage, defining common targets and implementation programmes, for instance in common water catchment areas, exchanging experiences in regional planning and landscape planning and defining contributions to implement the relevant Sustainable Development Goals. We entrust the EUSALP Action Group 6 to support the implementation of this declaration. We welcome the intention of the Austrian Presidency of the Alpine Convention to organize a high level conference in April 2019 that will bring together responsible Ministers from the Alpine States and Regions to further deepen and develop the cooperation.

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