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GOOD MANAGEMENT OF AGRICULTURAL SOILS: A SOCIAL PRIORITY

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
LIBERTÉ - ÉGALITÉ - FRATERNITÉ
CONSEIL ÉCONOMIQUE SOCIAL ET ENVIRONNEMENTAL

The soil is poorly understood by many even though it harbours the largest proportion of biodiversity on the planet and the ecosystem services that it provides are essential. It is the basis for plant life, unique in its ability to produce matter from the sun, air, water and the minerals present in the soil. Through biomass, it provides mankind with food and energy, and also with building materials,raw materials and chemicals for medical use. Its functioning is crucial for water and air cycles. Accordingly it regulates water both quantitatively by limiting rainwater run-off and therefore flooding risks, and qualitatively through filtration. Also, as the main storehouse for organic carbon, it helps to limit climate disruption.

The soil faces many threats, such as erosion, artificialisation and various forms of pollution. Yet, despite all of its properties, the soil is not legally protected in its own right.

In France, mixed land-use is leading to increasing tensions. The decrease in available agricultural land is a cause for concern. According to the sources and data used, between 2000 and 2012, this decrease was within an extremely broad range of between 40,000 and 90,000 hectares each year in mainland France alone. However, the goal of using the land more economically is a long-standing one, although it has been difficult to put into practice. The issue of preservation of soil quality has, for its part, been addressed indirectly or incidentally in public policy.

The ESEC takes the view that given the challenges we face in terms of population growth, food production, the environment and the climate, preserving the food-producing capability of agricultural soils in both mainland France and the Overseas Territories and maintaining their agronomic quality (along with the positive externalities they bring) are vital concerns for our society.

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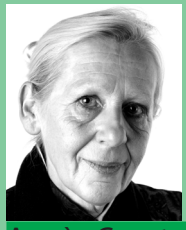

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ESEC PROPOSALS

STRENGHTEN KNOWLEDGE-GATHERING TOOLS

- Provide research with the resources to acquire detailed cartographic data and monitor changes to soil quality
- Populate databases with information provided by farmers, citizens, associations and researchers
- Pool knowledge and harmonise terminology and references
- Acquire complete morphopedological and agropedological data in the Overseas Territories
- Use land registry plans to monitor the actual use of agricultural and natural land
- Disseminate information so that informed decisions can be made on urban planning, land use and agricultural practices

PROTECT AGRICULTURAL LAND

- Set national targets for reducing the use of agricultural land with breakdowns for local areas
- Ensure the consistency of decisions on urban planning in rural or periurban areas, with priority given to local communities: local inter-communal plans, more thorough application of the territorial coherence schemes.
- Develop more upstream project design, information provision and collaboration between stakeholders
- Re-balance the commercial offer with greater regulation of big and medium sized areas and prioritise the restoration of ancient housings and the reconversion of existing industrial and commercial buildings.
- Incorporate agronomic and environmental land values into urban planning documents and take account of these, as well as whether or not the proposed changes of use are reversible or not.
- In terms of combating artificialisation, evaluate the effectiveness of taxing capital gains from the sale of agricultural land that is converted to buildable land to make the potential necessary changes; a tax increase could cover the tax relief proposed in the opinion
- Seek out all solutions that could prevent and reduce the impact of new projects, before applying the compensation rule
- Provide incentives for departments to make more use of the mechanism for the protection of natural, agricultural and periurban spaces (PENAP), reinforce the role of CDPENAF (Departmental Committees for the preservation of natural, agricultural and forest spaces) and assess the action of public land bodies.
- Set up in periurban belts land reserves for agriculture and give priority to the supply of community restaurants and local inhabitants with their produce.
- Combat land hoarding by acting at the EU and international levels to grant States the right to regulate and even oppose this type of appropriation.
- Propose new forms of agricultural land leasing through the regulation of tax mechanisms and financial earnings.

PRESERVE AND IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF AGRICULTURAL SOIL

- Develop research and experimentation on agroforestry and agronomic practices to improve the condition of soils in terms of their organic matter content and biodiversity.
- Encourage the involvement of farmers in the research and innovation processes and develop strategies for interacting with researchers, particularly to develop materials that prevent soil compaction
- Highlight the role of soils in carbon capture and climate change prevention
- Provide effective incentives in order to support agricultural practices and production methods that help to maintain the chemical, physical and biological quality of soils and prevent erosion: agroecology and agroforestry, preservation and replanting, where appropriate, of hedges and meadowlands, creation of grass strips, covering of soils between crops, long crop rotations etc.
- Use all available means to maintain existing polyculture-livestock raising farms and land and seek to relocate livestock raising in farming areas currently given over to industrial crop-growing
- Use the soil's natural resilience and remediation capabilities *using* phyto- and bio-remediation techniques.
- Manage the entire natural organic matter process to recycle all organic waste and return it to the soil.

RAISE AWARENESS REGARDING SOIL ISSUES

- Carry out communications campaigns targeting the general public and elected representatives to raise awareness regarding the important role
  played by the soil, humanity's shared heritage that must be protected, whilst upholding land ownership and usage rights.
- Incorporate this knowledge into teaching syllabuses and increase the prominence of agronomy in agricultural training.
- Act to address soil-related issues during the COP 21 Forum

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