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Science4Policy session 2

Hold the water: how healthy soils build Europe's water resilience

Europe is experiencing more frequent droughts, extreme rainfall, destructive floods, declining water quality and accelerating land degradation. These challenges are often addressed through separate policy lenses, yet they are deeply interconnected through the soil–water system.
Healthy soils function as natural water infrastructure: they absorb rainfall, store moisture, recharge groundwater, filter pollutants and buffer hydrological extremes. When soils degrade, landscapes lose their capacity to retain water. Runoff increases, flood risks intensify, drought impacts worsen and water quality declines, creating cascading effects across ecosystems, economies and public health.

Restoring soil health is therefore a central pillar of water resilience, while strengthening water resilience is also essential to prevent further soil degradation. Recent EU policy initiatives reflect a broader shift in land and water management: from approaches focused primarily on rapid drainage to strategies that prioritise water retention, healthier soils and more resilient landscapes. The Soil Monitoring Law (SML) establishes the first EU-wide framework for monitoring soil health, addressing challenges such as erosion, organic matter loss, compaction and contamination. At the same time, the European Water Resilience Strategy (EWRS) aims to restore and protect the water cycle, improve water retention and strengthen resilience to floods, droughts and water scarcity.

The cross-border implications of degraded soils make this transition particularly urgent. More than 60% of Europe's river basins are shared by multiple countries. Soil erosion, sediment flows, nutrient runoff, reduced infiltration and declining groundwater recharge can therefore have significant downstream consequences for neighbouring states, affecting water security, agricultural productivity, hydropower generation and ecosystem health.

Financing the transition towards soil- and water-resilient landscapes will be crucial. The current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) already supports soil and water management practices through eco-schemes and agri-environment-climate measures. In light of the proposed new structure of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which foresees greater flexibility for Member States in defining spending priorities and allocating funds, ensuring that agricultural financing continues to support soil health, water retention and climate resilience will be a key policy priority. Strengthening coherence between soil and water objectives within the future CAP framework and ensuring that the forthcoming National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) maintain strong environmental ambition will therefore be essential.

Against this backdrop, this session will explore how Europe can accelerate the shift towards landscapes that retain water, restore soils and strengthen resilience across sectors and borders.

Core questions for the session

- **How are EU policies evolving to address soil and water challenges in a more integrated and preventive way?** In particular, how can the Soil Monitoring Law and the Water Resilience Strategy reinforce each other to improve soil health, restore the water cycle and scale up nature-based solutions?

- **What are the cross-border implications of degraded soils for Europe's shared river basins?** How do erosion, sediment flows, reduced infiltration and declining soil carbon affect downstream water security, and what forms of basin-level cooperation are needed?

- **Why does soil health matter for water utilities and public authorities?** What costs do degraded soils create for water operators, and what solutions—such as upstream land management partnerships—are already emerging?

- **How can farmers strengthen water resilience through soil management?** Which practices are already being implemented to improve water retention and reduce runoff, and what barriers do farmers face in adopting them?

- **How can EU policies—particularly the CAP—better support farmers and rural actors in investing in soil health and water resilience?**

- **How are investors and companies beginning to recognise soil degradation and water stress as financial risks?** What policy signals, data and financing mechanisms are needed to scale investment in soil restoration and water-resilient landscapes?

About Think2030

Launched by IEEP and its partners in 2018, Think2030 is an evidence-based, non-partisan platform of leading policy experts from European think tanks, civil society, the private sector and local authorities.

By focusing on producing relevant, timely and concrete policy recommendations, Think2030's key objective is to identify science-policy solutions for a more sustainable Europe.

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Science-policy solutions for a more sustainable Europe