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21.04.2026 Session brief

Hold the Water : How Healthy Soils Build Europe's Water Resilience

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Hold the Water: How Healthy Soils Build Europe's Water Resilience

The Think2030 Cyprus Conference – IEEP 50th Anniversary, held on 21 April 2026, brought together European decision-makers, businesses, policy experts and civil society leaders to explore how Europe can deliver on its climate, biodiversity and zero-pollution ambitions while ensuring strategic autonomy in key sectors such as food systems, water management and industrial production. These discussions took place as the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) marks its 50th anniversary as the Brussels-based think tank specialised in EU environmental policy. For five decades, IEEP has supported evidence-based and impact-driven policymaking, helping to shape Europe's environmental acquis and its global leadership in sustainability.

As part of the Think2030 Dialogue, the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) organised a session titled "Hold the Water: How Healthy Soils Build Europe's Water Resilience" and this session brief summarizes the key take-aways from this session.

Lead: Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP)
Moderator: Melanie Muro, Director for Nature and Food Systems, IEEP
Speakers:

- Mirco Barbero, Team Leader of the Soil Team of the Land Use & Management Unit, Directorate-General for Environment, European Commission
- Hugo Harvey, Policy officer at Aqua Publica Europea, The European Association of Public Water Operators
- Amanda Björksell, Chair of the Working Party on Environment & Climate, COPA-COGECA
- Patricia Calderón, Climate and Nature Economist at FAIRR Initiative

Key highlights

- **Shift from reactive water management to prevention through land and risk governance**
  Water resilience is not primarily a technical challenge, but a land-use, risk allocation and governance issue. Investments are needed in preventive land and soil management that can reduce risks at source.

- **Recognise healthy soils as strategic water infrastructure for Europe's resilience.**
  Soils are key components of the water cycle, essential for water retention, flood and drought mitigation, pollution control and climate adaptation. Fully integrating soil functions into water, climate adaptation, disaster risk management and land-use planning is critical to restoring Europe's water resilience.

- **Move beyond isolated measures towards coordinated landscape action.**
  Restoring the soil-water nexus requires shifting beyond isolated field-level interventions to action at the landscape and basin scale where hydrological processes operate and resilience outcomes can be delivered. This requires clear governance arrangements, effective coordination mechanisms and incentives to support collective action across land users and sectors.

- **Ensure that soil monitoring results trigger concrete policy, planning and funding decisions.**
  The Soil Monitoring Law (SML) provides a framework for data collection, but its effectiveness depends on whether monitoring results trigger changes in planning, prioritisation and public and private spending. The Water Resilience Strategy aims to complement the SML in creating sponge landscapes.

- **Provide clear policy signals and data to mobilise private and public investment.**
  Scaling management practices to improve water retention requires a clear and credible direction of travel from EU and national policies. Aligning CAP support with Nature Restoration Plans and the soil health assessments required by the Soil Monitoring Law, together with metrics, data and accountability frameworks will be essential to de-risk investments and address misaligned incentives.

Summary of policy session (2000 words)

Europe is facing escalating water risks, including more frequent droughts and floods, declining water quality and accelerating soil degradation. In response to these growing pressures, **soils and water are receiving unprecedented political attention**. The EU has adopted its first Soil Monitoring and Resilience Law (SML) in 2025 and released the European Water Resilience Strategy (WRS) in 2024, both recognising soils as a central component of the water cycle and climate resilience to tackle the governance gaps across water, agriculture and land-use policies. At the same time, negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are opening a decisive window to translate these ambitions into long term investment priorities. While there is broad consensus on what needs to happen—restoring the broken water cycle, shifting from drainage to retention, and scaling sponge landscapes—there is far less clarity on how these ambitions will be implemented within existing legal, governance and financing frameworks.

A key message emerging from the session was that water resilience is not primarily a technical challenge, but a land-use, risk allocation and governance issue. Current approaches remain largely reactive and downstream, focused on treatment, infrastructure and crisis response, while underinvesting in preventive land and soil management that can reduce risks at source.

The session provided an opportunity to reflect on several conditions required to strengthen Europe's water resilience through healthier soils. There was a broad recognition that **healthy soils function as critical water infrastructure, underpinning flood prevention, drought resilience and water quality**. This framing was reinforced by Mirco Barbero who presented the SML as introducing '*a major novelty for the soil-water nexus*', integrating soil health explicitly with water retention and infiltration objectives, and requiring soils to be managed as part of the broader water cycle rather than in isolation. In addition, the SML requires integration with existing plans and initiatives, and it also facilitates cross-border cooperation.

A recurring theme was the need to **move beyond isolated interventions towards coordinated action at the landscape and basin scale**, in order to restore the soil-water system. To achieve this, clear governance arrangements and stronger incentives, alongside consistent data and metrics, were seen as necessary to support land managers and facilitate wider engagement from public authorities and private finance in scaling soil-based water retention solutions.

Within this broader push for coordinated action, a central question was **how to ensure that improved data leads to concrete decisions**. In the SML, it is up to the competent authorities to define thresholds for the levels and values triggering the need for action. The monitoring at the soil unit level is designed to directly inform

water management, climate adaptation and disaster risk planning. However, panellists stressed that its effectiveness will depend on governance choices: who interprets the data, how the thresholds are applied in practice and whether the monitoring results will influence the planning and spending decisions.

These governance questions are all the more urgent given that **soil degradation is already generating concrete operational risks for public water managers**, as explained by Hugo Harvey, and, in turn, for consumers. Increased pollution from pesticides and nitrates raises the cost and energy use in water treatment, with an impact on water affordability. The lower capacity of degraded soils to retain water also results in lower quantities of water available for use and increased floods downstream. But water operators do not always have the capacity to act upstream. Their mandates are typically being focused on service provision such as drinking water supply and wastewater management issues, rather than on wider land management issues. As a result, they may lack both the legal competence and the institutional mechanisms to engage in coordinated action across catchments. These limitations are compounded by other barriers to consider, such as the historical engineering culture that has favoured grey infrastructure to address water issues, or the lack of standardised metrics to demonstrate the benefits of nature-based solutions. While most operators are willing or already implementing these upstream measures, these barriers persist and add to the complexity of coordinating multiple land users and sectors at the landscape scale.

From a finance perspective, soil degradation and water stress are increasingly framed as emerging material risks for the agri-food sector. Although investor awareness is growing, action remains constrained by fragmented data across value chains and lack of tools to translate risks into decision-relevant metrics. Patricia Calderón emphasised that **private capital needs support to engage including by four critical elements: clear policy signals, repurposed (and aligned) subsidies, clear and actionable taxonomies and metrics, data and accountability**. However, the question of who pays and who benefits when implementing such measures remains unresolved. A core structural challenge lies in misaligned incentives. For example, farmers are often expected to bear the costs and risks of changing practices, while the benefits, improved water quality, flood protection and climate resilience, are shared across society.

Water resilience and climate adaptation were also presented as a key concern for the agricultural sector, although there are strong regional differences. Amanda Björksell noted that while many farmers already implement soil management practices improving water retention, **scaling these practices remains constrained by technical, financial and institutional barriers**. Like in the case of water infrastructure, the funding question remains, especially given that the SML and the

Nature Restoration Law do not have dedicated funding, and CAP resources are under pressure.

Reflecting on priorities to take this issue forward, the session concluded on a shared understanding that **coordination remains a key challenge**. While landscape management approaches and practices are well known, scaling them depends on governance systems that align incentives, coordinate responsibilities across agriculture, water, environment and spatial planning, and provide clear signals and support for long-term investment along the soil–water continuum for increased resilience. To conclude, Mirco Barbero reminded the audience that '*all big challenges ahead of us come back to soil. Soil is either part of the problem or the solution*'.

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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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