

The British Society of Soil Science and the Institute of Professional Soil Scientists welcome Defra's soil strategy for England which seeks to safeguard the nation's soils for the long term. The Secretary of State rightly highlights the many ecosystem services that our soils supply and the soil's fundamental importance to our life support system. The objectives and priorities identified in the strategy are laudable but its effectiveness will depend upon its implementation, and it is here that we foresee a potential problem. For a nation to safeguard its soils, it needs a sustained supply of soil scientists. A latter-day Roosevelt might well say that "the nation that destroys its soil *science* destroys itself". We should be concerned as a country that there is now no UK University offering an exclusive soil science programme at first degree level. Hence, where are the scientists going to come from who will indeed innovate and help develop future sustainable, environmentally-benign food production systems and protect our soil resources? Soils are amongst the most complex systems on the planet, and scientists are now beginning to understand some of the intricacies which underpin their function. Their sustainable management to deliver the full range of ecosystem services balanced across the nation will continue to require considerable insight, imagination and careful implementation.

As part of the International Union of Soil Scientists, the British Society of Soil Science works with colleagues globally to improve understanding, management and protection of the soil. Hilary Benn's belief that "the harmonised European approach that is currently proposed in the draft EU Soil Framework Directive is not the right one" is not one that we share and contradicts statements made in the strategy. We believe that Defra needs to work together with the devolved governments within a European context to ensure that there is a consistent and effective approach to soil protection at a UK and European level. Defra has stated that soil should be given equal status to the water which we drink and the air that we breathe. Without a European Soil Framework Directive, to equal existing Directives for other natural resources, soil will continue to be the poor relation to water, air and biodiversity. This is dangerous since the progress in safeguarding soils will be slow, insufficient and uncoordinated, benefitting only those who seek to exploit soils for short-term gain.

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