

Katharine Heyl (UPR): EU plastic governance for healthy soils

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Abstract: “Soils are key in overcoming the interlinked climate and biodiversity crises. Having or restoring healthy soils is thus essential to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity. However, globally, soil degradation is rising including by plastic pollution. Plastic pollution is caused by large plastic debris as well as micro- and nanoplastics. Micro- and nanoplastics are a major issue due to their ubiquity, persistence, mobility and practical irreversibility from the environment. Micro- and nanoplastics threaten wildlife and human health and can be found even in the most pristine areas of Earth.

Against this background, effective legislation to curb and at best halt plastic pollution is urgently needed. The proposed presentation seeks to assess the extent to which EU policies protect soils against plastic pollution. To this end, results from a qualitative governance analysis will be presented. The qualitative governance analysis focussed on several EU policies including the REACH Regulation, the proposal for the first legally binding EU instrument on soil protection –the Soil Monitoring Law –and the Proposal for Plastic Pellet Losses. For the presentation, a snapshot of the investigated policies will be presented.

Overall, the results show that the EU takes important first steps to address (plastic) pollution in soils. Proposing a soil monitoring and assessment framework and targeting plastic pellets along the entire supply chain are essential prerequisite to achieve healthy soils in the EU. However, substantial governance issues of the investigated policies remain. These include enforcement problems, potential shifting effects and lacking target stringency. As a consequence, the actual impact on soil plastic pollution will remain limited.

To effectively address soil plastic pollution, policy instruments will have to address the driver of soil plastic pollution –fossil fuels –and aim at their phase out.”

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