

*European Conservation Agriculture Federation (ECAAF)*

**Observations on the Communication from the European Commission:  
Towards a Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection  
(COM(2002) 179 final)**

The European Conservation Agriculture Federation (ECAAF) is a network of leading European academics, scientists and farmers whose mission is to help develop and spread farming practices focused on maintaining the agrarian soil and its biodiversity in the context of sustainable agriculture. These practices, collectively known as "Conservation Agriculture" or "CA", are based in altering the soil as little as possible and protecting it permanently with cover crops or stubble/crop residues.

We welcome the Commission Communication. At the same time, we believe that the policy debate now requires greater clarity and emphasis on the unique potential for CA techniques to produce immediate beneficial effects on agrarian soil quality across Europe. We therefore support the support for inclusion in the Parliament Resolution of a call for particular emphasis on the European interest in the further uptake of Conservation Agriculture is highly appreciated.

- **Soil protection : the highest priority for sustainable agriculture**

Protection of agricultural soil must command the highest possible priority in the broader effort to ensure the sustainability of agriculture here in Europe and worldwide. No other action can contribute as much - and as rapidly - to that long-term goal. No other failure will place it in greater jeopardy.

*ECAAF* therefore stresses the central strategic importance this EU policy process focused on soil protection, and applauds the Commission's intention to follow this Communication with another, dealing with erosion, the decline in soil organic matter and soil contamination including recommendations for actions to overcome them. This said, there is no reason to wait. *Immediate, practical, proven help is at hand.*

- **Conservation Agriculture : the highest priority for soil protection**

*All competent scientific authorities agree* that conventional tilling of the soil – mainly ploughing, disking and hoeing – is *the primary cause* of soil degradation in agriculture. Moreover, as the scope and power of mechanisation has increased (more - and more powerful - tractors), so has the threat to agricultural soil from mechanised tilling.

More specifically, these conventional techniques are beyond doubt *the primary cause* of four principle threats to agricultural soil identified by the Commission : soil erosion ; soil compaction ; the decline in organic matter ; the decline in soil biodiversity.

Because the primary threat to agricultural soil derives from conventional tilling practices, the highest priority for soil protection must be to change those practices – which means very simply switching to *well-known, proven no-tillage practices*, collectively known as “*Conservation Agriculture*” (or, “*CA*”).

- + The benefits of CA for soil protection are *proven*: these benefits are recognised by the FAO and scientists around the world, based on growing experience with CA techniques already applied to an estimated 80 million hectares worldwide.
- + CA techniques can be adopted *without prejudice* to the scale of production, or their combination with other farming practices, intensive or extensive. (Moreover, no other set of practices (as for example “organic farming”) is directly focused on soil protection – or uniformly provides it.)
- + CA techniques can be adopted by European farmers *today* : The Spanish and Portuguese governments already support transition to CA, as does the USA. But adoption of CA in Europe lags behind other major producer regions. *Strong EU-level, and EU-wide, policy support will be needed to close this gap.*

### **About ECAF**

**The European Conservation Agriculture Federation (ECAF)** is a network of leading European academics and scientists. It’s mission is to help develop and spread farming practices that alter the soil as little as possible, protecting it permanently with cover crops or stubble/ crop residues, and maintaining its biodiversity in the context of sustainable agriculture. ECAF is not involved in any commercial product, equipment and/ or trademark.

ECAF brings together fourteen national associations which promote among Europe's farmers soil management "best practice" through conservation agriculture. With member associations in Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, ECAF represents the interests of the majority of the European Union's cropped farmland

#### ***About Conservation Agriculture***

**Conservation Agriculture** refers to soil management practices, which minimise the disruption of the soil's structure, composition and natural biodiversity thereby also minimising erosion and degradation, and water contamination. Direct sowing and minimum cultivation systems are examples.

Conservation agriculture has an increasingly prominent role to play in world agriculture as farms seek to develop Integrated Crop Management (ICM) systems that benefit the environment and enhance farm profitability. Direct sowing and minimum cultivation systems are already in widespread use in North and South America and other parts of the world. ECAF’s mission is to help Europe catch up.

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