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Mr Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Following today's most thoughtful scientific presentations and the lively exchange of views among the distinguished members of the panel that we have heard, let me attempt to draw some conclusions the Commission would take out of today's conference.

Firstly, there has been agreement on the fact that soil is part of the climate change problem, but can also be part of the solution. To what extent soil is emitting greenhouse gases and to what extent the processes leading to these emissions can be reduced will need further work to be better understood and quantified. But the general picture is clear – through the adoption of appropriate soil management practices, maintaining carbon in soil and – if at all possible – increasing it can contribute to offsetting fossil fuel emissions.

According to Professor Lal, total carbon sink capacity of terrestrial ecosystems is equivalent to off-setting about 50 parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Although the carbon sequestration potential from soil may only be one seventh of fossil fuel emissions, Professor Smith has presented a strong argument in favour of soil sequestration, and soil sequestration now. At the same time, Dr Liski and Dr Freibauer have powerfully underlined the importance of natural peatlands as both a repository of carbon but also as a potential source of methane and nitrous oxide – not to mention their role in terms of water filtration and their rich biodiversity. In their views, protecting peatlands and promoting their restoration where already drained would constitute the most urgent action to undertake for reducing the huge greenhouse gas emissions from peat soils. Along this line, Dr Arrouays has pointed out that preserving existing carbon stocks might be more important than trying to create new ones.

All this points in the direction of the need to step up our efforts at EU level for ensuring that organic matter is kept in our soils and that best practices are progressively introduced to minimise, in particular, nitrous oxide emissions from agriculture. The figures mentioned by Professor Cerri for Brazil are particularly reassuring, as it seems that negative trends can indeed be changed.

In any case, we cannot afford to disregard the role that soil plays in the global carbon and nitrogen cycles!

And this leads me to the second message we will take out from the conference.

Albeit with significant uncertainties, we know that European soils are losing carbon, and – to a certain extent – we are able to estimate the amount of this loss. However, we are far from the situation for the United Kingdom presented by Mrs Bellamy, where a soil monitoring system has been in place for decades. I think there is a need to start working all together – European Commission, Member States, research community – for adopting a common legislative framework for soil protection in the EU that will allow us to gather more information and therefore manage the soil carbon pool in the most efficient way.

The relationship between soil and climate change is an issue of global consequences and has enormous transboundary impacts. Hence the progress done in soil protection in one Member States definitely has consequences for another Member State. Thus, there is an urgency to act at EU level.

Not surprisingly, I will here echo what Mr Dimas already said this morning – the Commission has already done its job in putting forward a proposal for a Soil Framework Directive! This proposal will lead Member States to identify where soil organic matter decline is happening in their territory. This will be the first step for building a knowledge base necessary for addressing the important challenge of climate change in relation to soil.

What Mr Prodi has said today has clearly shown the commitment of the European Parliament to go forward with the proposal. It has the support of civil society, here represented by Mr Nilsson of the European Economic and Social Committee. Twenty two Member States – including Slovenia and Portugal, which made enormous efforts for an agreement during its Presidency – are behind it. We now need all Member States to acknowledge the need to tackle soil protection at EU level. The blocking minority in the Council should realise the wider benefit that the Soil Framework Directive will bring, also in terms of adapting our economies to climate change. In this context, I take note with satisfaction of the commitment made by the French Secretary of State, Mrs Kosciusko-Morizet, to continue the discussions on the proposal under the French Presidency.

Which brings me to the third message that the Commission will take out of this conference – the need to adapt to climate change and the role that soil can play in it.

Professor van Ypersele earlier this morning has very forcefully reminded us of the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concerning Europe. Climate-related hazards will increase and climate change is likely to magnify regional differences. Water stresses will exacerbate desertification risks also in areas currently not subject to it. The issue is therefore not *if* but *how* we are going to adapt to an increase in average temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, increased flooding risks, longer droughts, and so on.

I believe that what we have heard today demonstrates that soil organic matter has a big role to play, a role that goes often unnoticed. Professor Lal has attempted to put a figure on such a role, in terms of the societal value of soil carbon. While we could discuss endlessly about the assumptions used to come up with such a figure, it is evident that a healthy soil with an optimum structure will be more resilient to negative climatic conditions. Which is the point also made by Minister Sveinbjarnardóttir during the panel discussion.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me close my intervention with three important points.

I trust that today's conference will be instrumental in raising the awareness about soil and its relationship with climate change, and that you will become ambassadors of this relationship in your countries.

I trust that the presentations and the discussions you have heard will be helpful in shaping your contribution – at whatever level that might be – for better soil organic matter management across Europe.

Finally, as we need to achieve better soil organic matter management, I trust that you fully share with me the urgency of adopting legislation on soil protection at EU level – and make your voice heard back home!

On a more mundane note, after the closing remarks by Mr Gnacadja, you are all invited to a drink reception, courtesy of the European Commission, to complete this fruitful but long day.

Thank you for your attention.