

NGOs support a Forest Strategy that addresses current challenges for forests

Forests are the bedrock of nature, our climate, and the European quality of life and way of life. Europe has a diversity of forests, but the challenges they face go beyond borders and require a new approach, encapsulated in the 2030 Forest Strategy. European cooperation on forests is critical to ensure that they provide for people and businesses, enhance biodiversity, and stand resilient in the face of the increased impacts of the climate crisis.

Ahead of the Working Party on Forests on 25 October, the undersigned organisations call on all Member States to support the Forest Strategy to make good on their international promises on biodiversity and the climate, and to stop endorsing status quo forestry practices.

There is a false dichotomy being made between the economic, environmental and social role of forests. Employment and the long-term health of forests, as well as our ability to fight the climate crisis, are dependent on resilient ecosystems and sustainable land management. Achieving these goals requires easy access to information and open discussions with stakeholders.

Despite increased harvesting and clear cuts, employment in the forest sector decreased by 33 per cent from 2000 to 2015. As the recent EU Court of Auditors report reiterated, the condition of forests is deteriorating. All three pillars of sustainability - economic, ecological, and societal - are suffering.

The EU has a long and cooperative history with Member States on forest-related issues. EU Member States must seize the opportunity presented by the Forest Strategy and adopt strong Council Conclusions that offer a just transition to a low-carbon forest sector.

Member States have largely acknowledged the benefits of collecting more integrated data on forests. The EU has provided over €45 million to boost EU forest monitoring through the Forest Focus scheme, and concluded that further work needs to be done as it “does not provide enough representative information on the state of EU forests”.

If Member States are serious about their obligations under the Birds and Habitats Directives, as well as international commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international fora, they must commit to further action to promote restoration, including making good use of available funds, and disincentivise damaging practices.

The Forest Strategy is the key opportunity to engage in this dialogue. The following initiatives should be endorsed in upcoming Council Conclusions as they can support the long-term viability of European Forests:

- **Support the Forest Observation, Reporting and Data Collection Framework:** National Forest Inventories use different national definitions, variables, and thresholds for elements as fundamental as the definition of a forest. As research suggests, it is possible to harmonise this information, and this will enable countries to easily see differences between forests.
- **Indicators as well as thresholds for sustainable forest management:** Forest Europe, which is mentioned in the Forest Strategy, has provided a first set of criteria - although they did not offer ways to measure them. Additionally, significant ambiguities continue to prevent a clear assessment of forests, such as the definition of ‘plantations’.

- **Definitions and guidelines for closer-to-nature forestry practices, and primary and old-growth forests:** Evidence-based decision making requires clear definitions to reward best practices or to penalise destruction of critically important ecosystems.

On behalf of the undersigned,

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