



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

Mid-term review of the EU Forest Strategy

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- The Forest Strategy is an effective tool for harmonising various policy areas and for reconciling the different perspectives of the Member States and their regions. Its role is also to highlight new objectives and measures which should be examined at EU level.
- For local and the various regional authorities, forests are an important element of economically, environmentally and socially sustainable development which for more than a century has been reflected in the framing and implementation of management plans, based on the principles of persistence, stability and sustainable yields of their many products, and on the application of robust forest legislation that supports and protects forests. They should therefore be consulted when the EU Forest Strategy is updated.
- Many initiatives have been developed to support the diversity of forests in the EU, such as the Natura 2000 network, the Birds and Habitats Directives, support for green infrastructure and the 2020 biodiversity strategy. Local and regional authorities are helping to implement them and they should be given more scope to contribute to the content of measures.
- In the reform of the common agricultural policy, it is important to include tools that support the forest sector in rural areas, such as those for the prevention of deforestation, for reforestation and for forest conversion, the planning and management of forests, support for forestation of marginal agricultural areas and for the introduction and renewal of agroforestry systems, the conservation of forests as an integral part of extensive livestock production systems as well as the promotion of entrepreneurship and training in the sector.

European forests protect biodiversity, maintain ecosystem services and store carbon emissions from the atmosphere. Today, around 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions are stored in forests. By pursuing a successful, long-term approach, depending on specific regional features, up to 90% of Europe's forests could be natural or semi-natural, hosting a wide range of species. Investing in a sustainable forest economy will continue to ensure more sustainable and healthier forests.

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Reference document

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Mid-term review of the EU Forest Strategy

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

Background to the EU Forest Strategy

1. In the European Union, competence for forest policy lies with the Member States.
2. However, in several areas affecting forests and their use, the European Union has exclusive competence or shared competence with the Member States. These areas include, in particular, the common commercial policy and agricultural policy, development policy, climate policy, environment, energy, the bioeconomy and the circular economy.
3. This has led to the need to ensure EU-level coordination of the EU policies that have an impact on forestry-related matters and to assess the impact of EU global commitments on the sustainable use of forests. The Forest Strategy should take into account the common objectives of the Member States and the differences between them. When the EU negotiates on issues affecting forests (see point 2 above), in the United Nations and the World Trade Organization for example, it must take into account Member States' views on forests and those of their regions. The Forest Strategy is an effective tool for harmonising various policy areas and for reconciling the different perspectives of the Member States and their regions. Its role is also to highlight new objectives and measures which should be examined at EU level.
4. In the EU, there is recognition of the sustainable forest management principles which were approved at a pan-European level and developed as part of the Forest Europe process. These principles, ensuring a sustainable management of forests and which should also include the principle of "cascading use", are applied when drafting national forest and nature conservation laws, and when preparing market-based certificates.
5. Forests cover 43% of the land area of the EU's Member States. This forest area is highly diverse, both in terms of the type of forest (including unwooded forest areas) and the possibilities for using it. More than 60% of these forests are in private hands, while the remainder is under various forms of public ownership. Local authorities also play an important role as forest owners. Ownership by local authorities is the third most common form of forest ownership in Europe.
6. Local and regional authorities may be forest owners. They may also manage forests and implement legislation relating to them. This means that they have significant experience and expertise in this field. For local and the various regional authorities, forests are an important element of economically, environmentally and socially sustainable development which for more than a century has been reflected in the framing and implementation of management plans, based on the principles of persistence, stability and sustainable yields of their many products, and on the application of robust forest legislation that supports and protects forests. They

should therefore be consulted when the EU Forest Strategy is updated. Local and regional authorities are not only important stakeholders in forestry-related matters, but also genuine interested parties in the same way that forest owners are.

II. A SUSTAINABLE FOREST POLICY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

7. Economically sustainable forest policy:

- 7.1 The forestry sector produces 7% of Europe's economic growth and provides jobs for 3.5 million people – up to 4 million if the forest bioenergy sector is also included. In 2011, the production value of the EU's forest industry was EUR 460bn. Forestry activities and jobs are crucial to rural and sparsely populated regions but also boost economic growth in towns and cities and foster cooperation between rural and urban areas. The Forest Strategy should emphasise economic growth, employment and European investments and identify the new opportunities that they offer, paying special attention to support for the economic development of players in the forestry sector in outermost regions.
- 7.2 Local and regional authorities can play a significant role in promoting businesses' use of local timber resources and the transition to a bioeconomy. For example, first and foremost the choice of construction materials and production of energy for the needs of communities and for the heating of publicly owned buildings and, secondarily, greater use of advanced biofuels in public transport are useful tools which can contribute to a stronger economy and employment in the regions. Developing and using advanced biofuels from forests and other sources is an important aspect of EU climate policy under the Renewable Energy Directive. This will require substantial investment in technology, pilot facilities and large-scale production, as well as a long-term regulatory framework that provides a stable basis for the large investments called for.
- 7.3 90% of the timber raw materials used by Europe are of European origin. From the point of view of employment and the economy at local and regional level, efforts should be made to pursue an even higher level of domestic consumption, while taking account of the sustainability of forest resources and the uses of timber. To this end, specific species present in our woods, for which there is currently no market demand, should be developed, with research into new uses and technologies.
- 7.4 The review of the Forest Strategy must be aligned with the updating of the bioeconomy strategy. Consistency must be ensured across the EU's various policies when developing the forest bioeconomy and fostering innovation.
- 7.5 In the reform of the common agricultural policy, it is important to include tools that support the forest sector in rural areas, such as those for the prevention of deforestation, for reforestation and for forest conversion, the planning and management of forests, support for forestation of marginal agricultural areas and for the introduction and renewal of agroforestry systems, the conservation of forests as an integral part of extensive livestock production systems as well as the promotion of entrepreneurship and training in the sector.

7.6 Economic sustainability also depends on efficient and transparent exploitation of forestry products, an area in which applied technology can play a very significant part.

7.7 There is also a need to develop and introduce dynamic, integrated forestry information and cartography systems, on the basis of which both owners and managers can make decisions.

8. **Environmentally sustainable forest policy:**

8.1 European forests protect biodiversity, maintain ecosystem services and store carbon emissions from the atmosphere. Today, around 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions are stored in forests. By pursuing a successful, long-term approach, depending on specific regional features, up to 90% of Europe's forests could be natural or semi-natural, hosting a wide range of species. Investing in a sustainable forest economy will continue to ensure more sustainable and healthier forests.

8.2 The use of forests is sustainable if wood grows at a faster rate than it is harvested and if biodiversity requirements are taken into account. It should be noted that the area of land covered by European forests, and the rate of their growth, have increased since the 1990s. Alongside diversity, one of the main objectives of environmentally sustainable forest policy is to halt deforestation globally and in areas of Europe that pose challenges. The diversity of forest ecosystems, and the different meaning they have for their surrounding areas in various regions of Europe, should be taken into consideration when assessing the sustainability of forest use.

8.3 Taking account of the diversity and multi-faceted nature of forest ecosystems in forest management is important for many plant and animal species, and for the recreational use of forests.

8.4 The mid-term review of the Forest Strategy should give greater consideration to the multi-dimensional importance of forests in climate policy, in the implementation of the Paris Agreement objectives in meeting the Aichi targets on biodiversity and in efforts to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals so that sustainable management of forests is treated on a par with other measures aimed at reducing CO₂ emissions. Local and regional authorities can act more effectively to meet common objectives, including in the forest sector, if the mid-term review contains concrete, specific and tried-and-tested proposals for action as well as examples.

8.5 A lively debate is being waged in Europe about the environmental status and development of forests and this sometimes results in disputes at local and regional level. It is important that research into European forests, their management and their development receives the necessary resources and that reliable data on forests is available to the authorities and civil society from public sources, with a view to facilitating dialogue.

8.6 Many initiatives have been developed to support the diversity of forests in the EU, such as the Natura 2000 network, the Birds and Habitats Directives, support for green infrastructure and the 2020 biodiversity strategy. Local and regional authorities are helping to implement them and they should be given more scope to contribute to the content of measures.

8.7 In many EU Member States and regions forest fires represent the main threat to the conservation of forest ecosystems¹. Local community action is the fastest and most effective way of limiting the damage caused by forest fires. EU action must focus on providing technical training assistance so that the capacity of communities for self-help can be enhanced, including better preparation of firefighting services and other public safety practitioners to provide an initial response and contain a disaster²;

8.8 In this context, it should be highlighted that, thanks to some outermost regions, the EU possesses Amazonian and subtropical forests. These primary forests constitute a unique laboratory for scientific research, specialisation and innovation (such as pharmaceutical research and the development of plant extracts). Biodiversity in the outermost regions represents nearly 80% of European biodiversity and is vital for the ecological balance of the planet. Local and regional authorities are the guardians of this priceless treasure and ought to be given adequate support for its management and preservation.

9. **Socially sustainable forest policy:**

9.1 Forests provide many ecosystem services and natural products in addition to timber. Sustainable forest management will ensure that this remains the case for citizens in future too. The natural products and recreational opportunities offered by forests have many health benefits.

9.2 Forests also provide ample benefits to society, particularly in terms of quality of life and well-being, being extremely important for people's balance in life; for this reason it is proposed that the creation of new forest areas be promoted through public or private initiatives and with EU support.

9.3 The use of socially sustainable forests requires long-term spatial planning. In matters concerning the use and protection of forests, forest owners, local and regional authorities and those living in regions must be consulted.

9.4 The EU Forest Strategy should shape EU trade and development policies at global level: the environmentally sustainable use of forests in developing countries, biodiversity and the social sustainability of forest policy (land ownership, the rights to use forests, rights of local residents) must be placed high on the EU's global agenda.

9.5 Research data concerning the development and use of forests must be readily available to citizens and local and regional authorities with a view to supporting decision-making. This is an argument in favour of making the Commission's 2018 research into European forests widely known and presenting it extensively to sectoral stakeholders and the broader public.

¹ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Forest policy: the 20/20/20 targets, [OJ C 141, 29.05.2010, p. 45–49](#).

² Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Review of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, [COR-2018-00617-00-00-AC-TRA-EN](#).

- 9.6 All the above will be possible only with the conservation of a forestry culture that must be strengthened and enriched internally through exchanges of experience and practices from all European forestry areas, and externally with the support and backing of the urban population. To this end, we must strive to convey to them the benefits of forests and forestry management.
- 9.7 All forestry strategies - regional, national and above all European - must take as their most urgent starting point that of keeping populations in place: it is this that makes it possible to manage and exploit woodland resources.

Brussels, 16 May 2018

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

III. PROCEDURE

Title	Mid-term review of the EU Forest Strategy
Reference	
Legal basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Procedural basis	Own-initiative Opinion
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	29 November 2017
Commission responsible	Commission for Natural Resources
Rapporteur	Ossi Martikainen (FI, ALDE)
Analysis	2 February 2018
Discussed in commission	9 March 2018
Date adopted by commission	9 March 2018
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Majority
Adopted in plenary	16 May 2018
Previous Committee opinions	
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	
