



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**NAT/762**  
**EC Progress Report on the EU Forest Strategy**

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy 'A new EU Forest Strategy: for forests and the forest sector'**

[COM(2018) 811 final]

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Referral	European Commission, 18/02/2019
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Plenary Assembly decision	22/01/2019 (in anticipation of the referral)
Section responsible	Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Adopted in section	01/10/2019
Adopted at plenary	30/10/2019
Plenary session No	547
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	162/0/1

## 1. Conclusions and policy recommendations

The EESC...

- 1.1 calls for an updated EU Forest Strategy after 2020 as a part of the European Green Deal. The new strategy could feasibly look ahead to 2050, to ensure coherent implementation of well-recognised political commitments such as the UN Strategic Plan for Forests, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. The importance of forests, forestry and forest-based industries in meeting these goals should be recognised across all sectors and lead to optimised cross-sectoral cooperation;
- 1.2 highlights climate change as a major challenge for the planet with immediate, mostly negative, consequences for the forest sector itself. At the same time, the forest-based sector has great potential to provide solutions for mitigation through a sustainable and circular bioeconomy under the precondition that effective adaptation strategies are implemented in good time. The full potential of CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration must be further developed by enhancing wood mobilisation in a sustainable manner, increasing the substitution of fossil-based raw materials and energy, and stepping up carbon storage in long-lasting wood products. Forests made up of diverse species foster more climate benefits than monocultures, which can have a negative impact on long-term sustainability;
- 1.3 emphasises the importance of further developing harmonised forest information systems in order to increase knowledge and data on the availability and status of forest resources and the opportunities they present to provide society with multiple services, including renewable raw materials, energy and other forest products;
- 1.4 underlines the importance of the multifunctional role of forests and notes that climate change is a threat to ecosystem services. Due to climate change, the likelihood of natural disturbances such as forest fires, floods, droughts and damages caused by pests such as bark beetles is projected to increase. A solid mix of financial instruments is crucial to ensuring continued investment in modern technology as well as in climate and environmental measures to strengthen the multifunctional role of forests. When it comes to private forest holdings, it is crucial to ensure that property rights are respected and decisions related to forests are made in partnership with forest owners;
- 1.5 recommends a mapping of the current status of the workforce and a forecasting of labour needs in the European forest-based sector, especially regarding the workforce in the forests. An accurate picture of the attractiveness of the sector and its skilled labour force is necessary to further develop the forest-based value chain and ensure the vitality of the ecosystems. Decent jobs and labour conditions are a prerequisite to attract people to the forest-based sector;
- 1.6 encourages, when it comes to forest-related EU policies, strong ex-ante involvement of the Standing Forestry Committee, the Civil Dialogue Group on Forestry and Cork, and the EU Expert Group on Forest-based Industries and Sectorally Related Issues, in order to take full advantage of the available expertise;

- 1.7 stresses the importance of reducing global deforestation and forest degradation by strengthening active and sustainable forest management, for example through a pan-European agreement, mobilising locally produced biomass in Europe and supporting the transition towards more sustainable consumer patterns.

## 2. **General comments**

The EESC...

- 2.1 welcomes the European Commission's report on the progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and notes that most of the actions in the Multi-Annual Implementation Plan (Forest MAP) have been implemented as envisaged;
- 2.2 welcomes the Council Conclusions on the progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and the recommendations regarding a new strategic framework for forests;
- 2.3 reiterates the importance of Member States' subsidiarity when it comes to forest policy and underlines the crucial role of the EU Forest Strategy as a policy coordination and coherence tool across the various forest-related policies to strengthen the holistic view of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) and the forest-based sector's value chain;
- 2.4 emphasises the relevance of the forest-based sector when it comes to the transition from a fossil-based to a bio-based economy. A strong role for the forest-based sector in the circular bioeconomy will provide great opportunities for the European economy to reach technological global leadership in this sector;
- 2.5 highlights climate change as a major challenge for humankind and our planet, which already affects forests and the forest-based sector to a serious extent (e.g. impact on quantity and quality of wood supplies and enormous amounts of damaged wood). Consequently, mitigation measures and the management of forests and their adaptation to changing climatic conditions are crucial. Healthy and resilient forests have a decisive role in this regard. Active and sustainable management, including the maintenance of forest biodiversity are essential to safeguard their resilience and vitality in the long-term. Further development of wood mobilisation (e.g. via digitalisation and new techniques) and the use of wood and wood-based products are key elements in achieving the climate targets. The full potential of CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration needs to be further developed through increased substitution of fossil-based raw materials and energy, and carbon storage in long-lasting wood products;
- 2.6 stresses the importance of research and innovation in finding solutions for more sustainable woody biomass-based value chains. This will boost progress towards GHG emissions reductions in terms of processing technologies as well as the development of new innovative woody biomass-based solutions for the markets. Further development and the take-up of digital and technological solutions will facilitate precision-forestry technologies and offer improvements to support sustainable forest management;

- 2.7 acknowledges the importance of the multifunctional role of forests and the provision of multiple ecosystem services and recognises climate change as a major threat to forests fulfilling this role. Therefore, adequate resources are required to ensure that the various ecosystem services continue, including the protective function of forests, as well as a sustainable supply of wood for society, while safeguarding biodiversity and ensuring climate change adaptation. A solid mix of financial instruments (e.g. EIB, EFSI, CAP, ESF, national funds, private funds) will ensure the continuation of investments in modern technology as well as in climate and environmental measures that strengthen the multifunctional role of forests. The future MFF should consider the establishment of a specific fund for measures to mitigate substantial losses in forestry due to climate change;
- 2.8 underlines the important role of actively managed forests and the forest-based industry in the creation of additional green jobs and growth in rural and urban areas, including those related to ecotourism, recreation and health services;
- 2.9 emphasises that new and modern techniques in the forest sector require a skilled labour force and decent labour conditions. Currently, the lack of skilled young workers seems to be a Europe-wide problem. Appropriate measures must therefore be taken to address this challenge and attract young people to the forest-based sector. In this regard, mapping the workforce would be a useful step;
- 2.10 stresses the need to foster early planning, cooperation and investment when it comes to the prevention and tackling of natural disturbances such as forest fires, floods, drought and damage caused by pests (e.g. from bark beetles) and diseases;
- 2.11 underlines the importance of forests' protective role against erosion, avalanches, rock falls and floods, especially in mountain areas;
- 2.12 notes that forests are naturally biodiverse ecosystems, including managed forests. However, industrial monoculture plantations, particularly of non-native species, often lack biodiversity, entail an increased disaster risk and in some cases do not act as net sequestrators of carbon. Sustainable forestry must include the need for mixed-species forest cover managed under a continuous-cover forestry model. Forests made up of diverse species foster more climate benefits than monocultures, which can have a negative impact on long-term sustainability;
- 2.13 encourages better ex-ante incorporation of the expertise of the Standing Forestry Committee, the Civil Dialogue Group on Forestry and Cork, and the EU Expert Group on Forest-based Industries and Sectoral Related Issues into forest-related EU policies. This will strengthen the knowledge base regarding the forest-based value chain in decision-making, in public awareness and communication campaigns, and in the endorsement and implementation of political decisions;
- 2.14 points out that local governments and regional authorities play an important role in strengthening the sustainable use of forests and the vitality of the forest-based sector, and have the opportunity to consider this in public procurement processes;

2.15 considers proper communication and information measures about SFM to be important for ensuring the support of society. In this regard, urban and peri-urban forests offer great potential, as there are strong interlinkages between society (local recreation) and the forest-based sector;

2.16 emphasises the importance of fostering the process towards a legally binding agreement on forests in order to strengthen the policy framework on forests in the pan-European region.

### 3. **Specific comments**

#### 3.1 **Forests play a decisive role in tackling climate change:**

3.1.1 The transition to a climate-neutral economy is a huge challenge as well as an opportunity and requires a considerable reduction of fossil emissions as well as a substantial increase in CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration. The substitution of fossil-based raw-material products and fuels has huge potential as regards reaching climate neutrality by 2050.

3.1.2 Effective absorption of CO<sub>2</sub> requires continuous and increasing biomass growth and sound harvesting methods and timing. The long-term storage of biogenic carbon requires an enhanced (more, better, longer) use of wood-based products. Active and sustainable forest management and the resource-efficient use of wood are key elements in achieving the climate targets (as already outlined in a previous opinion on the implications of climate and energy policy<sup>1</sup>, and in a previous opinion on effort-sharing and the LULUCF sector<sup>2</sup>). Efforts to enhance the use of wood-based products could benefit from the recognition of a wider array of "harvested wood products" (HWP) under the LULUCF Regulation and, in any case, from HWP gaining longer half-life values through the use of environmentally appropriate wood-preserving technologies.

3.1.3 One m<sup>3</sup> of wood captures around one metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub><sup>3</sup>. Growing biomass has the proven capacity to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. Therefore active forest management under SFM practices<sup>4</sup> and the continuous regeneration of forest stands are crucial to achieving a maximum sustainable increase that fosters biomass availability.

#### 3.2 **Multifunctional forests and ecosystem services require adequate remuneration:**

3.2.1 In addition to wood and non-wood products (e.g. cork, mushrooms, berries), forests provide a variety of ecosystem services on which rural, peri-urban and urban communities depend (e.g. water, air, recreational space, health services). Changes to conditions due to climate change increase the pressure on forests and the risk of natural hazards occurring. Accordingly, appropriate climate protection measures and mitigation and adaptation efforts must strengthen the resilience and multifunctional role of forests.

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<sup>1</sup> EESC opinion on the Implications of climate and energy policy on agricultural and forestry sectors [OJ C 291, 4.9.2015, p.1](#)

<sup>2</sup> EESC opinion on Effort-sharing 2030 and land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF), [OJ C 75, 10.3.2017, p.103](#)

<sup>3</sup> Source: [BFW-Praxisinformation Nr. 28 \(2012, page 4\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Resolution H1 [General Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Forests in Europe](#)

3.2.2 Despite the difficult market situation caused by calamities aggravated by climate change (e.g. bark beetles, wind throws, forest fires, floods and drought), it is of the utmost importance to ensure the continuity of ecosystem services, in order to maintain this multifunctional role of forests. Therefore, it is crucial that an adequate market setting backs the supply of wood and woody biomass for forest-based industries.

3.2.3 It could also be worthwhile to look into the commodification of carbon offsets through voluntary carbon markets<sup>5</sup>. For example, the Life pilot project CARBOMARK<sup>6</sup> deals with the development of voluntary local carbon markets for climate change mitigation. The objective is to promote a local market for trading carbon credits on a voluntary basis, as a means of strengthening the EU's policies on combating climate change:

- mitigating the effect of greenhouse gases by fostering carbon capture;
- generating income for disadvantaged areas by estimating the value of the carbon-capture service provided by the forest ecosystem;
- promoting the adoption of offsetting strategies by local administrations;
- making small and medium-sized enterprises more accountable, and thus encouraging them to mitigate their own environmental impact.

However, it is important to ensure that the compensation mechanism is not disproportionate either way and does not hamper the sustainable wood mobilisation and sustainable management of the resource.

**3.3 A sustainable and circular bioeconomy provides economic opportunities for the forestry sector with great potential to mitigate climate change (as already outlined in a previous opinion<sup>7</sup>):**

3.3.1 A sustainable bioeconomy contributes to climate change mitigation through several mechanisms: sequestration of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere in biomass via photosynthesis, storage of carbon in bio-based products and substitution of fossil-based feedstock, materials, products and fuels through bio-based ones.

3.3.2 Wood-based products can store carbon for a long time, thereby keeping it out of the atmosphere. Long-lasting wood products, such as timber for wood construction and high-quality furniture are some of the most effective means of carbon storage. The reuse and recycling of bio-based products with shorter working lifespans will guarantee that the carbon remains stored. All these products, including advanced biofuels, textiles and green chemicals, have great potential to replace fossil-based raw materials and products that are the main causes of climate change. Moreover, at the end of their working lifespans, bio-based products can be used for new

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<sup>5</sup> [Voluntary Carbon Market Insights: 2018 Outlook and First-Quarter Trends](#)

<sup>6</sup> [CARBOMARK - Improvement of policies toward local voluntary carbon markets for climate change mitigation](#)

<sup>7</sup> EESC opinion on Bioeconomy - contributing to achieving the EU's climate and energy goals and the UN's sustainable development goals [OJ C 440, 6.12.2018, p. 45](#)

bio-based products or as bioenergy and thereby replace fossil energy sources. There is, of course, also the case for side streams along the value chain.

3.3.3 Facilitating the establishment of well-functioning bio-based, wood-based value chains through cross-sectoral cooperation can play a key role in the development of new business ecosystems and opportunities for the sector. In this regard, it is important to give priority to research, innovation and the upscaling of innovations, as well as education, training and skills development, in order to support these wood-based value chains and the circular bioeconomy in general.

#### 3.4 **Strengthening sustainable forest management (SFM) and halting global deforestation must remain clear objectives of the EU Forest Strategy:**

3.4.1 SFM is a national competence of EU Member States, and the commonly agreed definition of SFM is embedded into national and sub-national laws that are implemented across the EU. Sustainable forestry practices are based on forest governance systems at national level. Voluntary market-based tools, such as certification, can be one way of providing proof of sustainability.

3.4.2 Reducing global deforestation and forest degradation by strengthening active and sustainable forest management through a pan-European agreement, sufficiently robust sustainability chapters in trade agreements, mobilising locally produced biomass in Europe and supporting the transition towards more sustainable consumer patterns are all key to achieving the SDGs. In addition, common efforts are needed in supporting afforestation activities globally.

3.4.3 In this regard, the EESC welcomes the EC communication on "Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests"<sup>8</sup>.

## 4. **Background**

4.1 The European Commission published the mid-term review report<sup>9</sup> on the "Progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy" ("the report") on 7 December 2018. The report provides insights into progress in the implementation of each of the eight priority areas as identified by the EU Forest Strategy<sup>10</sup>:

1. Supporting our rural and urban communities
2. Fostering the competitiveness and sustainability of the EU's Forest-based industries (F-BI), bioenergy and the wider green economy
3. Forests in a changing climate
4. Protecting forests and enhancing ecosystems services
5. What forests do we have and how are they changing?

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<sup>8</sup> [COM\(2019\) 352final](#)

<sup>9</sup> [EU forest strategy on track to achieve its 2020 aims](#)

<sup>10</sup> [COM\(2013\) 659 final](#)



6. New and innovative forestry and added-value products
  7. Working together to coherently manage and better understand our forests
  8. Forests from a global perspective.
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- 4.2 The Multi-annual Implementation Plan<sup>11</sup> (Forest MAP) lists priorities for the EC up to 2017. The report also seeks to help determine the priorities for the remaining period 2018-2020.
  - 4.3 The report concludes that the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy is largely on track. Outstanding elements either are in the process of implementation or will be implemented by 2020. However, the report does not look beyond 2020.
  - 4.4 On 15 April 2019, the Council adopted its Council Conclusions<sup>12</sup> on the Progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and called on the Commission "to start reflecting on options for a new EU Forest Strategy post 2020". Logically, such a strategic framework should be for forests and the forest-based sector as a whole.
  - 4.5 The European Committee of the Regions adopted an opinion<sup>13</sup> on the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy at its plenary session in April 2019.

Brussels, 30 October 2019

Luca JAHIER

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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11 [SWD\(2015\) 164 final](#)

12 [Council Conclusions on the progress on the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and on a new strategic framework for forests](#)

13 [CoR opinion: Implementation of the EU Forest Strategy](#)