

A new impulse for EU forests

Forests are a valuable asset, serving economic, social and environmental purposes. Forests and wooded land cover over 40% of European Union territory, and represent 5% of the world's forests. The EU is one of the biggest traders and consumers of wood products in the world. In September 2013, the European Commission presented a renewed Forest Strategy to improve the coherence of forest-related measures and allow synergies with other sectors that influence forest management.

Background

Europe, and the EU in particular, is the only part of the world where forest area has been steadily [increasing](#) since 1990. Some 60% of [EU forests](#) belong [to private owners](#). The remainder is publicly owned. The most common type of resource extracted from forests is wood, which is a natural, renewable, and recyclable material used in a wide range of products (see figure 1). The wood-based industries [employed](#) 3.4 million persons across the EU-27 in 2011. The [price](#) of wood is increasing due to its growing use as [biomass](#) (i.e. a renewable energy source) and for [bio-based products](#) (i.e. from materials of biological origin).

Policy framework for EU forests

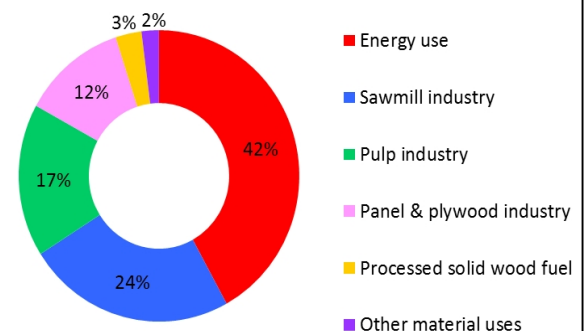
Responsibility for forests lies with the Member States, although EU policies in the environmental, agricultural and energy fields have direct impact on forest protection and management. In addition, specific instruments such as the [EU Forestry Strategy](#) (1998) and the [EU Forest Action Plan](#) (2006) have explicitly addressed forest issues, albeit grounded in shared responsibility. At pan-European level, the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (also known as [Forest Europe](#)) is the main political initiative for forest protection and sustainable forest management, based on voluntary commitments.

[Expert](#) analysis of EU policy coherence on forests concludes that conflicts arise from the fragmentation of measures, leading to contradictory policy objectives, inconsistent enforcement due to the voluntary character of measures, and unsystematic control of achievements. In a 2013 [special report](#), the EU Court of Auditors questioned the added value of financial support under the Common Agricultural Policy for EU forests (€535 million in 2007-2013). The Court found, in particular, that public aid was excessive compared to needs. In its reply, the European Commission committed to setting up a stricter monitoring and evaluation framework for the [2014-20 period](#).

EU Forest Strategy 2013

Given growing demand for raw materials, the new EU [Forest Strategy](#) aims to address the challenges facing forest-based industries (e.g. structural adaptation, innovation, international competition) and to step up the protection of forests from the effects of storms, fires, scarce water resources, and pests. Building on existing fundamental principles (e.g. [sustainable management](#), [resource efficiency](#), and [global responsibility](#)) the Commission proposes action in eight areas, including support for rural development and forest-based industries, improving forests' resilience to climate change, and stimulating innovation. The Strategy has been welcomed by stakeholders. However, environmentalists [regretted](#) its limited legal power, amounting to only 'a line of conduct', while [industry](#) and [forest owners](#) criticised the 'cascading use' principle (i.e. priorities for the use of raw materials) mentioned only as a good practice. In May 2014 [conclusions](#), the Council stressed the need for coordination. In March 2015, the EP's Committee on Agriculture (rapporteur Elisabeth Köstinger, EPP, Austria) [supported](#) resource-efficient use of timber but opposed legally binding rules on the cascading use of wood, arguing this would restrict the energy market. The EP has however [called for](#) the introduction of a legal instrument based on this principle for biomass.

Figure 1: Use of wood resources – EU27, 2010



Source: Eurostat, [Forestry in the EU and the world](#), 2011.