
Forestry as a tool to counter climate change: MEPs strike deal with Council

- CO2 emissions and absorption must balance out by 2030
- Managed wetlands included in accounting scheme
- Accounting rules will not bind or restrict private owners

Plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions and boost absorption from forests as a way to tackle climate change were informally agreed by Parliament and Council on Thursday.

“Two years after the conclusion of the climate change agreement in Paris, we have today achieved a major success for the EU's climate commitments. We have now put another pillar of our climate policy into concrete terms”, said lead MEP Norbert Lins (EPP, DE).

“Forest management should continue to be active and sustainable in the future, as this is the only way to ensure that it has a positive impact on ecology and economy. We have found a credible balance between flexibility and comparable accounting rules for the 28 member states. Having the countries in charge of this issue will ensure that the principle of subsidiarity is fully respected. In addition, these requirements relate exclusively to member states and will not bind or restrict owners”, he added.

The proposed law would lay down rules under which EU countries have to ensure a CO2 emissions are balanced by CO2 absorption by forests, croplands and grasslands. MEPs ensured that managed wetlands will also be included in the accounting system, given that they, too, store important quantities of CO2.

MEPs bolstered these provisions by adding that from 2030, member states should boost CO2 absorption to exceed emissions, in line with the EU's long-term objectives and the Paris Agreement.

Removing extra CO₂ = credits

If more CO₂ is absorbed than emitted by land use in the first 5-year period (2021-25), this credit can be “banked” and used later, to help achieve goals for the second five-year period (2026-30). Member states may also use part of such credits to comply with emission reduction targets under the Effort Sharing Regulation.

Member states will account for their emissions, with the target of balancing the emissions and removals to be met in both the two five-year periods. If a member state does not meet its commitment in either period, the shortfall will be deducted from its allocation of credits under the Effort Sharing Regulation.

Next steps

The preliminary agreement will be discussed in the Environment Committee in January 2018.

Quick facts

The benchmarks for each member state will be set on the basis of a “forest reference level” - an estimate of the average annual net emissions or absorption from managed forest land within the territory of that member state. It should be based on documented management practices between 2000 and 2009.

Emissions that are outside the control of member states (e.g. forest fires) may be excluded from accounting. However, the rules limit this exemption to avoid creating a loophole.

Land use and forestry include use of soils, trees, plants, biomass and timber, and are in a unique position to contribute to a robust climate policy. This is because the sector not only emits greenhouse gases, but can also remove CO₂ from the atmosphere. EU forests absorb the equivalent of nearly 10% of total EU greenhouse gas emissions each year.

The draft law, which is part of the climate package presented by the European Commission in July 2016, proposes to integrate greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use-change and forestry into the 2030 climate and energy framework.

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