



THE EUROPEAN UNION AND FORESTS

As the Treaties make no specific reference to forests, the European Union does not have a common forestry policy. Forestry policy therefore remains primarily a national competence, but many European actions have an impact on forests in the EU and in third countries.

What is a forest? This would seem to be a simple question, but there is no one answer valid for all the Member States. Nevertheless, for the purposes of international forestry statistics, Eurostat follows a classification scheme set up by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and applies the following definition: a forest is land with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10% and an area of more than 0.5 hectares. The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 metres at maturity in situ.

FORESTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: VALUABLE MULTIFACETED AND MULTI-PURPOSE ECOSYSTEMS

A. The European forest landscape, a mosaic largely shaped by man

Taking the definition given above, there are 182 million hectares of forest (5% of the world's total) in the EU. In total, forests cover 43% of the EU's land area and the six Member States with the largest forest areas (Sweden, Finland, Spain, France, Germany and Poland) account for two thirds of the EU's forested areas (3.2.10). Forest coverage varies considerably from one Member State to another: while forests in Finland, Sweden and Slovenia cover more than 60% of the country, the equivalent figure is only 11% in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Moreover, unlike in many parts of the world where deforestation is still a major problem, in the EU the area of land covered by forests is growing; by 2010, forest coverage had increased by approximately 11 million hectares since 1990, as a result of both natural growth and afforestation work.

The EU has many different types of forests, reflecting its geoclimatic diversity (boreal forests, alpine forests with conifers, etc.). Their distribution is mainly determined by climate, soil type, altitude and topography. Only 4% of the forested area has not been modified by human intervention. 8% consists of plantations, while the remainder falls into the category of 'semi-natural' forests, i.e. ones shaped by man. What is more, the majority of European forests are privately owned (approximately 60% of forested land) rather than publicly owned (40%).



B. The multifunctionality of forests: their environmental, economic and social role

From an environmental point of view, forests provide numerous ecosystem services: they help protect the soil (against erosion), form part of the water cycle, and regulate the local climate (mainly via evapotranspiration) and the global climate (in particular by storing carbon). They also protect biodiversity by providing a habitat for numerous species.

From a socioeconomic point of view, working forests generate resources, in particular timber. Timber can be obtained from 134 million of the 161 million hectares of forests (there are no legal, economic or environmental restrictions on this activity). What is more, felling in these forests accounts for only around two-thirds of the rise in the annual volume of timber used. The primary use is for energy generation (42% of volume), as against 24% for sawmills, 17% for the paper industry and 12% for the panel industry. Approximately half of the renewable energy consumed in the EU comes from wood. In addition, forests are a source of non-wood products — food (berries and mushrooms), cork, resins and oils — and are needed for certain services (hunting, tourism, etc.). Forests are thus a source of employment, particularly in rural areas. The forestry sector (forestry, wood and paper industry) accounts for approximately 1% of EU GDP, although the figure is as high as 5% in Finland, and provides jobs for some 2.6 million people. Lastly, forests have an important place in European culture.

C. Abiotic and biotic threats — challenges exacerbated by climate change

The abiotic (i.e. physical or chemical) threats to forests include fires (particularly in the Mediterranean); drought; storms (on average, over the past 60 years, two major storms a year); and atmospheric pollution (emissions from road traffic or industrial plants). The fragmentation of forests as a result of the construction of road infrastructure also poses a threat to biodiversity. As for biotic factors, animals (insects, cervids) and diseases can damage forests. In total, approximately 6% of forested land areas are damaged by at least one of these factors.

Climate change is already a serious problem for Europe's forests. While its precise impact will differ depending on geographic location, climate change is likely to affect not only the forests' rate of growth, forest land coverage and the range of species, but also the range of biotic agents such as certain parasites, and even the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. How forests can adapt to these changes and the part they can play in combating them (e.g. through the use of wood instead of non-renewable energy and materials) represent two major challenges.

The EU's forests are thus the focus of numerous expectations, some of them competing, as the tensions between working them and protecting them illustrate. Reconciling difficulties of this kind forms one of the main challenges in the area of forestry governance.

FORESTRY POLICY AND INITIATIVES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: COHERENCE IS THE KEY

As the Treaties make no specific reference to forests, the European Union does not have a common forestry policy. Forestry policy is thus still primarily a national matter.



Many EU measures do have an impact on forests in EU and non-EU countries alike, however.

A. The European Reference Framework for Forestry

In September 2013, in its Communication on ‘A new EU Forest Strategy: for forests and the forest-based sector’ (COM(2013)0659), the Commission set out the new EU strategy and proposed a European reference framework for sectoral policies having an impact on forests. This strategy has two main goals: 1) to ensure that Europe’s forests are managed sustainably and (2) to strengthen the EU’s contribution to promoting sustainable forest management and tackling deforestation worldwide. It also sets out a strategic approach governing action by the Commission and the Member States. To give just one example, the Commission has undertaken to develop sustainable forest management criteria. In September 2015, it adopted the accompanying multi-annual implementation plan of the EU forest strategy (SWD(2013) 0343). This so-called ‘Forest MAP’ draws up a list of the actions that are to be taken in response to challenges in the European timber sector (for further details on the history of this process, see also the section on the ‘Role of the European Parliament’ below).

As this plan draws to a close at the end of 2020, the Council has called on the Commission to present a new forest strategy for the coming years. This new strategy is raised in the December 2019 Commission communication on the European Green Deal (COM(2019) 0640), in which forests are viewed as one of the most important areas when it comes to tackling climate change.

B. A wide range of European Union actions affecting forests

1. The common agricultural policy (CAP), the main source of EU funds for forests

Some 90% of EU funding for forests comes from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). During the 2007-2013 programming period, approximately EUR 5.4 billion was allocated from the EAFRD budget to co-finance forestry measures. Following the most recent reform of the CAP, the new regulation on support for rural development by the EAFRD was published in December 2013 (Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 [3.2.6](#)). In the interests of simplification, over the period 2015-2020 a single specific measure includes all types of support for investment in forests. The measure covers investment in the development of forested areas and improvement of the viability of forests: afforestation and creation of woodland, establishment of agro-forestry systems, prevention and restoration of damage to forests from forest fires, natural disasters and catastrophic events, investment to improve the resilience and environmental value of forest ecosystems and investment in forestry technologies and in the processing, promotion and marketing of forest products. Another measure is intended to provide rewards for forestry, environmental and climate services and the conservation of forests. Provision has also been made for other measures not specific to forestry (Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive payments, for example). It is up to Member States to select which forestry measures to implement, and to decide on the financing to be provided for them, as part of their rural development programmes. Some EUR 8.2 billion has been earmarked for the 2015-2020 period (27% for reforestation, 18% to make forests more resilient and 18% for damage prevention).



2. Other European Union measures in support of forests

The marketing of forest reproductive material is regulated at EU level by Directive 1999/105/EC. The European plant health regime aims to prevent harmful organisms spreading to forests (Directive 2000/29/EC). The EU also helps fund forest research, in particular under the Horizon 2020 programme. In the energy policy sphere, the EU has set itself the legally binding target of meeting 20% of total energy consumption from renewable energy sources by 2020, which should increase the demand for forestry biomass (Directive 2009/28/EC). The new EU climate and energy framework for 2030 sets a higher target: 27%. Moreover, under EU cohesion policy, forestry projects (fire prevention, renewable energy production, climate-change preparations, etc.) can be co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The Solidarity Fund (Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002) seeks to help Member States tackle major natural disasters, such as storms and forest fires. As for the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism (Decision 1313/2013/EU), this can be deployed when a crisis outstrips a Member State's ability to cope, as has happened with some forest fires (Greece, 2007 and 2012) and some storms.

In addition, some 37.5 million hectares of forest are part of the Natura 2000 nature protection network, set up under the EU's environmental policy. The rational use of forests is one of the thematic priorities of the European Union's new Environment and Climate Action Programme (LIFE 2014-2020, Regulation (EU) No 1293/2013). The EU Biodiversity Strategy ([COM\(2011\) 0244](#)) stipulates that sustainable forest management plans for publicly owned forests must be in place by 2020. The European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) monitors forest fires. The EU also encourages ecological tendering ([COM\(2008\) 0400](#)), which may promote demand for sustainably produced timber. What is more, the European ecolabel has been awarded for wood flooring, furniture and paper. In addition, the FLEGT Action Plan provides for voluntary partnership agreements with timber-producing countries and a regulation to ban the marketing of illegally harvested timber, which came into force in March 2013 (Regulation (EU) No 995/2010).

The EU also participates in numerous international activities relating to forests (in particular the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Forest Europe is still the main political initiative on forests at pan-European level. Discussions are under way on a legally binding agreement on forest management and sustainable use. As part of its policy on climate change, in addition to its participation in global negotiations on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the EU has taken its first steps towards integrating agriculture and forestry into its climate policy (see Regulation (EU) 2018/841 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework). The EU has also set itself the objective of halting the loss of global forest cover by 2030 at the latest and reducing tropical deforestation by at least 50% by 2020 ([COM\(2008\) 0645](#)). It is also funding projects under the REDD+ Programme to reduce emissions linked to deforestation and forest degradation in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Finally, the Neighbourhood Policy can also be put to use: the FLEG II programme had EUR 9 million available for the



period 2012-2016 to promote good forestry governance, sustainable management of forests and forest protection in countries to the east of the EU.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament legislates on an equal footing with the Council in a great many fields that affect forests: agriculture, the environment, etc. (ordinary legislative procedure). Moreover, Parliament adopts the EU budget jointly with the Council. Parliament has influenced many items of legislation having an impact on forests, for example on the common agricultural policy and energy policy (revision of Directive 2009/28/EC on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources — [2016/0382 \(COD\)](#)).

In the past, Parliament has, via various resolutions, advocated more coordination and policy coherence in the European Union with regard to the different policies affecting European forests. On 30 January 1997, with the adoption of its [resolution](#) on the European Union's forestry strategy^[1] (its first ever own-initiative report), Parliament called on the Commission to present proposals for a European forestry strategy. This plea was answered by the Commission with its communication on a forestry strategy for the European Union (COM(1998) 0649) and in turn backed by the Council, which adopted the first EU Forestry Strategy on 15 December 1998.

In response to the report on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy ([COM\(2005\) 0084](#)) for the period 1999-2004, Parliament re-emphasised the importance of this strategy and reiterated its support through its [resolution](#) of 16 February 2006 on the implementation of a European Union forestry strategy^[2]. In the same resolution, Parliament backed the implementation of an 'EU action plan for sustainable forest management' proposed by the Commission, suggesting a series of coherent and concrete objectives and measures in the various policy fields linked to forests. This 'EU Forest Action Plan' (FAP) was originally conceived by the Commission for a five-year period (2007-2011), aiming, as a complementary instrument, at better coordination of 18 defined 'key actions' ([COM\(2006\) 0302](#)).

Following up on the Commission's green paper of 1 March 2010 entitled 'On Forest Protection and Information in the EU: Preparing forests for climate change' ([COM\(2010\) 0066](#)), in its [resolution](#) of 11 May 2011^[3], Parliament welcomed a revision of the Forestry Strategy in order to better address the specific challenges linked to climate change and the sustainable management and protection of forests.

On 20 September 2013 the Commission presented its communication entitled 'A new EU Forest Strategy: for forests and the forest-based sector' ([COM\(2013\) 0659](#)), thus responding not only to increasing demands placed on forests, but also to significant societal and political changes. This recast was backed by the Council with its conclusions of 19 May 2014 and also by Parliament with its [resolution](#) of 28 April 2015 entitled 'A new EU Forest Strategy: for forests and the forest-based sector'^[4]. In this resolution, Parliament calls on the Commission to supplement the

[1]OJ C 55, 24.2.1997, p. 22.

[2]OJ C 290E, 29.11.2006, p. 413.

[3]OJ C 377E, 7.12.2012, p. 23.

[4]OJ C 346, 21.9.2016, p. 17.



strategy with a robust action plan containing specific measures and to report back to it annually on the progress made in the implementation of specific actions under the strategy. Parliament also stressed that the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy should be a multiannual coordinated process. In Parliament's view, priority should be given to promoting the competitiveness and sustainability of the forest sector, supporting both rural and urban areas, expanding the knowledge base, protecting forests and preserving their ecosystems, improving coordination and communication and increasing the sustainable use of wood and non-wood forest products.

The resulting 'Multi-annual Implementation Plan of the new EU Forest Strategy' (SWD(2015) 0164) was issued by the Commission on 3 September 2015. It lists a number of actions to ensure a coherent, coordinated approach to the various policies and initiatives relating to the forest sector, with the particular involvement of stakeholders. The so-called 'Forest MAP' provides a framework within which all new policies in any of the various areas relating to forests can be considered. The following eight priority areas cover the three pillars of sustainable forest management, namely social, economic and environmental: 1) supporting our rural and urban communities; 2) fostering the competitiveness and sustainability of forest-based industries, bioenergy and the wider green economy; 3) forests in a changing climate; 4) protecting forests and enhancing ecosystem services; 5) forest information and monitoring; 6) research and innovation; 7) working together; and 8) forests from a global perspective. It includes an annex with the concrete list of actions for the period 2014-2020, the actors, and the timing of the different activities, as well as the expected outcomes. The Commission also committed itself to regularly informing Parliament and the Council on the progress being made under the EU Forest Strategy. After an initial phase (2015-2017) of implementation of a series of priorities, the Commission's December 2018 progress report (COM(2018) 0811) on the EU Forest Strategy takes stock of the progress made in the multiannual implementation plan and should help to determine the respective priorities in the second implementation phase (2018-2020).

Lastly, in its resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal ([2019/2956\(RSP\)](#)), Parliament 'welcomes the intention of the Commission to tackle global deforestation[,] asks it to step up its actions [and] to present a new, ambitious EU Forest Strategy to give appropriate recognition to the important, multifunctional and cross-cutting role that European forests, the sector and sustainable forest management have in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss [...]'. In that context, Parliament has decided to prepare two own-initiative reports: one entitled 'Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests' and another entitled 'The European Forest Strategy - The Way Forward'.

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