

RESEARCH REGARDING THE EUROPEAN UNION FORESTS FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

At pan-European level, the focus is on the ongoing negotiations on establishing a legally binding agreement on forests, with the EU as a key actor. Through this agreement, the EU aims to improve sustainable forest management across the region. The new strategy forms a suitable vehicle for the implementation of the agreement. At global level, the EU is at the frontline of work on combating deforestation and forest degradation. It promotes sustainable forest management as a way of protecting biodiversity, fighting desertification and responding to climate change, whilst ensuring that forest ecosystems deliver goods and services. In this way it contributes to sustainable development and to eradicating poverty. REDD+, FLEGT and the EU Timber Regulation aim towards these goals. Mapping and assessing the state of forest ecosystems and their services requires better EU forest information. Relevant variables and parameters will be harmonised at EU level, based on cooperation between international, pan-European and national data acquisition systems, and on a detailed analysis of EU challenges.

Keywords: forest, management, strategy, biodiversity, climate change

INTRODUCTION

This strategy aims to ensure consistency between EU and Member State policies, objectives and commitments on forest-related issues at international level. It supports the EU and Member States formulating clear and coherent objectives.

Strategic orientations are:

- ensure consistency between EU and Member State policies and commitments on forest related issues at international level;
- promote sustainable forest management across Europe and globally, and the role of forests in the transition to a green economy in the context of EU development cooperation and external action;
- ensure continued support for global efforts to fight illegal logging through the FLEGT Action Plan;
- support developing countries in their efforts to improve forest policies and regulations, strengthen forest governance, value and monitor forest ecosystems, and address the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation through REDD+.

The Commission will assess the environmental impact of EU consumption of products and raw materials likely to contribute to deforestation and forest degradation outside the EU. If appropriate, it will consider policy options for limiting such impacts, including the development of an EU action plan on deforestation and forest degradation. It will do this in line with the 7th EU Environment Action Programme.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Fostering the competitiveness and sustainability of the EU's Forest-based Industries, bio-energy and the wider green economy - Wood is a natural, renewable, reusable and recyclable raw material. If it is sourced from sustainable-managed forests, is processed and

used to minimise negative effects on climate and the environment while providing livelihoods, its role can be sustainable. Overall, 58% of harvested EU wood biomass is processed by EU Forest-based Industries, 12 representing about 7% of EU manufacturing GDP and nearly 3.5 million jobs, and contributing to achieving the goals of EU Industrial Policy. However, its future competitiveness requires new resource and energy-efficient, and environmentally-sound, processes and products (CIOLAC ET AL., 2013).

Advanced wood-based materials and chemicals are expected to play a major role in the EU bio-economy. A Staff Working Document describes the EU Forest-based Industries' sub-sectors, their economic and technological outlooks, and identifies their major challenges and remedial actions (2013-2020) to help improve their global competitiveness.

Strengthening the forest knowledge base is needed to better understand the complex environmental and societal challenges facing the forest sector (STANCIU, 2012). Mapping and assessing the state of forest ecosystems and their services requires better EU forest information. Relevant variables and parameters will be harmonised at EU level, based on cooperation between international, pan-European and national data acquisition systems, and on a detailed analysis of EU challenges. EU programmes such as LIFE+ could help mobilise the resources needed. The Comălițămission and Member States have developed a modular system for forest information, and work on biomass and biodiversity is ongoing.

RESULTS

Forests are vulnerable to climate change. It is therefore important to maintain and enhance their resilience and adaptive capacity, including through fire prevention and other adaptive solutions (e.g. appropriate species, plant varieties, etc.). (STANCIU ET AL., 2010). At the same time, forest management can mitigate climate change if forests' role as sinks in the carbon cycle is maintained or enhanced and by providing bio-materials that can act as temporary carbon stores or as 'carbon substitutes', replacing carbon-intensive materials and fuels.

The EU recently adopted rules for accounting, monitoring and reporting on LULUCF under which Member States will, for example, provide information on their plans for enhancing sinks and reducing forest-related emissions. The EU and Member States have also made LULUCF - related commitments to be achieved by 2020, the 2nd Commitment Period under the Kyoto Protocol. Forests also mitigate the impact of extreme weather events by moderating temperatures, and reducing wind speed and water run-off.

Forests provide ecosystem services on which rural and urban communities depend, and host an enormous variety of biodiversity (BANU ET AL., 2010). Pressures on forests, such as habitat fragmentation, spread of invasive alien species, climate change, water scarcity, fires, storms and pests call for enhanced protection (MARTIN ET AL., 2013). EU rules cover the movement and trade of certain plants, plant products and objects that can threaten plant health. Protection efforts should aim to maintain, enhance and restore forest ecosystems' resilience and multi-functionality as a core part of the EU's green infrastructure, providing key environmental services as well as raw materials.

Further emphasis should be put on preventing negative impacts on forests rather than on damage mitigation and restoration. For forests to be able to react to future threats and trends, genetic diversity must be enhanced and endangered genetic resources protected (BANU ET AL., 2011). Both the nature and the effects of certain threats are trans-boundary and therefore action at EU level is needed. Forest Management Plans (FMPs) or equivalent instruments based on the principles of sustainable forest management are key instruments in delivering multiple goods and services in a balanced way. FMPs are at the core of both

the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and EU Rural Development funding. The strategy encompasses them and promotes and supports their use.

A coherent and ambitious EU forest-based research area is required to stimulate innovation across the forest sector. It should take into account forest specificities such as long timeframes. EU framework programmes for research and development support the forest sector (LILE, 2009).

The forest sector is more present in the 7th Research Framework Programme and in Horizon 2020, in line with the Bioeconomy Strategy for Europe. The goal is to enhance the sector's sustainability and its contribution to the rural economy through sustainable forest management, improve its capacity to face biotic and abiotic stresses, and develop better forestry production systems and products (MOATĂR ET AL., 2013).

Various crosscutting policy issues address forests, and their objectives sometimes differ. Coordination, cooperation and communication are therefore essential to achieving policy coherence and consistency. Various options to improve coordination and implementation were discussed with Member States, including a framework directive on sustainable forest management. However, no consensus on going beyond a voluntary approach was found. In any case, links with forest related policies must be improved.

The current EU forest governance structure relies on the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC). The SFC should remain the forum for discussing all forest-related issues, ensuring coordination and coherence of forest-related policies. However, improvements are needed to ensure that the SFC responds to inputs from other policies. The SFC worked with the Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork, the Habitat Committee and the Expert Group on Natura 2000 management to jointly prepare the guide on Natura 2000 and forests – this could be used as best practice (ORBOI ET AL., 2010).

Also, more emphasis could be put on the SFC's role of keeping forests multifunctional. The Advisory Committee on Forestry and Cork will remain the main multi-stakeholder platform for discussing issues related to forestry and sustainable forest management, and the Advisory Committee on Forest-based Industries will remain the main platform for issues related to industrial value chains. These should be the cornerstones for developing and following up on the new strategy.

Communication is a particular challenge for the sector, as the public is generally not aware of how significant sustainable forest management is, or of the various ways in which the forest sector contributes to the green economy.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the forest sector falls outside Article 42 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, all competition rules fully apply to it. The remaining 42% is used for energy, accounting for about 5% of total EU energy consumption. According to the National Renewable Energy Action Plans, biomass will still be the main source of renewable energy in 2020. The Commission is currently assessing whether additional measures, including harmonised sustainability criteria, should be proposed to address sustainability issues related to using solid and gaseous biomass for heating, cooling and electricity. Thus, forest-based biomass, together with non-wood forest products, which are gaining market interest, provide opportunities to maintain or create jobs and diversify income in a low-carbon, green economy.

Other areas, in which Member States should advance further, such as preventing forest fires, combating pests and diseases, promoting sustainable wood and regional/cross-regional cooperation, will be identified. Forests and the forest sector currently receive

significant EU funding. Forestry measures under the Rural Development Regulation are the strategy's resource backbone (90% of total EU forestry funding).

According to the updated plans, €5.4 billion from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development have been earmarked for forestry measures in 2007-2013. Although it will depend on Member States' Rural Development Plans, a similar level of spending to that in the current period could be expected for 2014-2020. This spending should be dedicated to contributing to the objectives of this strategy, and in particular to ensuring that EU forests are demonstrably managed according to sustainable forest management principles. LIFE+ supports nature conservation, climate change adaptation, information and protection needs, the structural funds support cohesion projects and Horizon 2020 supports research and innovation actions, including the public-private partnership on bio-based industries.

Development and climate change policies also provide financing for third countries, in particular through EU development funds, REDD+ and FLEGT. Rationalising available resources and improving coordination between EU and national funding can contribute to the strategy's better implementation.

This strategy aims to put forests and the forest sector at the heart of the path towards a green economy and to value the benefits that forests can sustainably deliver, while ensuring their protection. Strong commitment and political support from all parties involved are needed for this. A review will be carried out by 2018 to assess progress in implementing the strategy.

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