

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament Reporting on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy

(2006/C 115/19)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — Reporting on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy COM (2005) 84 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision by the Commission on 17 March 2005, acting under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its bureau on 16 November 2004 to instruct the Commission for Sustainable Development to prepare an opinion on the subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the Council resolution of 15 December 1998 on a forestry strategy for the European Union;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 19 November 1997 on *Management, use and protection of forests in the EU* (CdR 268/1997) ⁽¹⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 18 November 1999 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a forestry strategy for the European Union (CdR 184/199) ⁽²⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 12 February 2003 on the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Regulation concerning monitoring of forests and environmental interactions in the Community (Forest Focus) (CdR 345/2002) ⁽³⁾;

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 213/2005 rev. 1) adopted on 6 October 2005 by the Commission for Sustainable Development (rapporteur: Mr Enrico Borghi, Member of Vigogna Municipal Council (IT/ALDE));

adopted the following opinion at its 62nd plenary session, held on 16 and 17 November 2005 (meeting of 17 November):

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

— believes that the strategy should be repositioned within the 'newly emerging policy context';

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **is pleased** that the Commission, in response to the Council Resolution of 15 December 1998, has prepared an assessment report of the implementation of the forestry strategy;

— has proposed the development of a European Action Plan for sustainable forest management and a review of the existing instruments to facilitate coordination and cooperation between the various sectoral policies which affect forestry, and a review of the role the Standing Forestry Committee;

1.2 warmly **welcomes** the fact that all the Community institutions are currently reviewing the document, which is indicative of the interest that the forestry issue has generated on an increasingly wider scale;

1.4 **emphasises** that the current EU Treaty — and the new constitutional Treaty — make no provisions for a common forestry policy and do not include timber among agricultural products; this means that the EU has to rely on coordination and environmental policy instruments, and — within the framework of agricultural regulation — forestry initiatives, given that the Commission has not chosen to exercise its right to initiate legislation;

1.3 **notes** that the Commission:

— has not drawn explicit conclusions from the strategy's results;

— has confirmed the continuing validity of the principles and key elements of the strategy: sustainable forestry management, the multifunctional role of forests and a reference to national forest programmes;

1.5 **takes note**, however, of the Commission's proposal to pursue the development of the strategy, with reference to the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies, by creating a European action plan for sustainable forest management, as it believes it can achieve better formatted and clearer instruments which would be more readily applied in the various Member States than at present;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 64 of 27.2.1998, p. 25.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 57 of 29.2.2000, p. 96.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 128 of 29.5.2003, p. 41.

1.6 as far as the global development of the European strategy is concerned, **expresses satisfaction** with the exhaustive list of existing documents and agreements, but notes that the subsidiarity principle is applicable here, too. This therefore requires either the ratification of international agreements by the Member States or the development of coordination arrangements between the community bodies;

1.7 **believes** that as in the case of water, woodland and forests (the relationship between the two elements could not be more clear) are of global strategic importance and should be subject to a Community policy rather than be the sum of many parts that do not slot together easily to form a common, clear-cut instrument, particularly given the link between deforestation and the flooding it causes.

Aspects of the forestry strategy

The Committee of the Regions

1.8 **considers** that so far the forest/wood relationship has not been adequately addressed by Community economic development policies, so much so that, notwithstanding the fact that, cumulatively, they have created jobs and a multitude of businesses across the wood industry, it is considered to be a marginal sector;

1.9 **considers it necessary** that the use of the different qualities of wood produced in Europe, including wood grown in plantations for energy-supply purposes, should be addressed with a long-term Community strategy. In order to promote the use of wood, information and communication projects must be developed; these would illustrate the technical characteristics of wood and innovative ways of using it, with a view to replacing other materials whose cumulative costs, including disposal once the work is finished, are becoming increasingly burdensome;

1.10 **considers** the need to use economic development policies to give a boost to other forestry products besides wood; some of these are already mentioned in the report, such as cork, resins, medicinal plants, mushrooms and berries, while others are not, such as hunting, beekeeping, pine nuts, chestnuts and herbs;

1.11 **supports** the development of forestry certification, which must become a means by which producers can trade their wood in the internal market, thereby creating an element of competition that can be perceived by users and by the general public. The certification systems should remain voluntary and procedures should be framed by the various organisations requesting them. The state should not interfere by imposing regulations, with the exception of those that are necessary for ensuring transparency and preventing the dissemination of fraudulent information;

1.12 **considers it useful** to continue and step up action to promote the use of low-value wood by-products and wood residue, and wood grown in plantations for energy-supply purposes, for the production of heat and energy in neighbouring areas with a view to using alternative flammable materials;

1.13 **believes** that the future action plan must provide support for the various forestry organisations — land ownership, use — taking particular care to consolidate, or rather restructure some sectors of the wood industry; at the same time, forestry associations should be promoted and supported;

1.14 **takes note** of the much greater awareness of the multifunctional role of forests and woodland which, in the majority of cases however, is not reflected to its full potential in the economies of the areas in question or in local incomes; on the contrary, in many cases owners must deal with the constraints and limitations set by the authorities. This problem has not been remedied and cohesion and rural development policies have not yet managed to incentivise or adequately promote the forest economy. In order to remedy the situation, at least in part, it is important to adopt the measures linking forest policy and rural development contained in Commission proposal COM(2004) 490 final;

1.15 **believes** that the Lisbon and Gothenburg objectives for more and better jobs and ever greater social cohesion should be given sufficient consideration when drafting the action plan, with regard to both forest industry workers and the areas concerned;

1.16 **believes it necessary** that the action plan should support the idea of having a high proportion of forestry experts who would be highly adept at furthering the development of forestry. The experts would also be able to organise and provide support for the forest industry and owner and market operator associations. The plan must also provide for programmes and initiatives to ensure that forest industry employees have adequate opportunities to advance in their career and receive the necessary training;

1.17 **asserts** that sustainable forest management, forestry and environmental legislation and the framing and implementation of programmes must be supported by accurate information and knowledge about the areas concerned in order to ensure the full cooperation of local inhabitants and the social and cultural growth of their communities;

1.18 **supports** the FLEGT initiatives to tackle illegal logging and ensure that international agreements are respected, **calls** for their continuation and hopes that they will receive full legal implementation;

1.19 **calls on** the Community institutions to launch initiatives to protect European producers from unfair competition from products deriving from areas which do not guarantee the protection of workers and local indigenous populations, who are often victims of blatant exploitation;

1.20 **confirms** its support for the EU's environmental policies on forests and welcomes the fact that Europe's protected areas are consistently increasing, as well as the measures taken to protect biodiversity and combat desertification;

1.21 **welcomes** the fact that environmental policies are increasingly shaping the environmental legacy of European society and that Community measures have contributed towards these positive results;

1.22 **emphasises** that the action plan must promote the conversion of forest formations with a view to making them more multifunctional, promoting biodiversity, helping create a distinctive landscape and, more importantly, protecting water resources and air quality. In any event, the sustainable forest management principles established in Rio de Janeiro and strategic guidelines designed to adapt forest formations and the forest industry as a whole to climate change must be implemented;

1.23 **is concerned** about the environmental damage that can be caused by forestry operations and ancillary activities in environmentally sensitive areas. Peat uplands, in particular, need special protection;

1.24 **believes that it is essential** to incorporate scientific and technological research initiatives in the plan, particularly on:

- innovative uses of wood and other wooden materials, especially in the construction industry;
- updating forestry vehicles and technologies;
- forest management with a view to achieving multifunctionality;

1.25 **believes** that the most pressing issues for research are forestation schemes, the restoration of forest top-soils through afforestation, and forest management with a view to identifying ways of enhancing carbon sequestration in the medium- and long-term. These research fronts need to be adequately addressed in the Seventh Framework Programme, taking into account the various environmental and climatic characteristics of individual European regions;

1.26 **trusts** that the action plan will provide for a programme of EU-wide long-term initiatives in order to enhance the public's understanding of the various aspects and benefits of Community forests; it especially calls for information campaigns for the general public, and more specifically, for young people with organised trips to protected areas, forest industry sites and firms that use wood as raw material;

1.27 **reiterates** the need for the action plan to include precise guidelines to protect woodland and forests from fires, pollution and biotic agents and to highlight the fact that forests can help prevent landslides, avalanches and floods;

1.28 **believes** that in tax Member States have a powerful instrument with which to develop and promote the appropriate forest policy proposals and guidelines, particularly those dealing with the formation of associations or having social and environmental significance. The action plan could provide information on the developments underway in the various Member States, and facilitate synergies.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 **suggests** that every avenue be explored to establish a legal basis for the Community forest strategy, given that the issue is now recognised as being of global importance;

2.2 **calls** for all the Community institutions to ensure that the Commission's proposal, provided that it is not amended, is rapidly implemented, thereby ensuring that the future plan will not just be a blueprint for the Member States, but will also identify specific responsibilities and resources for its implementation;

2.3 **believes** that the EU plan should be adopted with the knowledge that national forest plans will be framed within a fixed time frame and that they will take on board the provisions set out in the Community plan;

2.4 **proposes** that the action plan should set out proposals for the promotion of the various sectors of the forest industry, to be applied in the Member States, and provide, for a set of incentives designed to ensure the proper functioning of the industry, the upkeep of forests that provide low or no economic return, the setting up of owner and tenant associations under the guidance of forestry experts, the development and follow-up of projects, initiatives, social, environmental and forest protection services, on condition that these are covered by regional and local authority programmes;

2.5 with a view to securing feasible global agreements, **urges** full commitment to framing a new international forestry agreement, which by implementing the Council's conclusions of 26 April 2005, would be applicable world wide as regards sustainable management;

2.6 would once again **recommend** that maximum priority be given to the relationship between forest activity and wood-based industries, marketing the various types of European wood and to the support of the whole forest industry — which calls for maximum coordination between Commission departments;

2.7 **calls for** the potential uses of renewable energy produced in forestry to be improved and further developed. These should be better integrated in the Commission Strategy on renewable energy, so as to grant forestry operators specific benefits;

2.8 **considers** it is necessary that the plan should address the environmental, tourist, cultural and social services provided by woodland and forests so that they can be appreciated on their own merits, and provide economic assessment criteria, with a view to encouraging owners and managers to bring these services to the market. Where this market does not exist, the plan should propose various methods and measures to ensure that the calculated environmental benefit translates into higher income for the owner or manager of the property;

2.9 **calls** for the plan to ensure that projects funded by the authorities can be implemented by the forest owner and manufacturer organisations, if they are willing and able so to do;

2.10 **believes** it is essential that the plan should include key elements which would be useful to the Member States and other authorities for re-examining current legislation, certain aspects of which certainly hinder the implementation of Community goals; measures to simplify administrative procedures at all levels are also required;

2.11 **endorses** the Commission's proposal to review the role of the Standing Forestry Committee so that it is in a position to enable it to help frame and implement the plan or to maintain strong, influential relations with the Member States;

2.12 **feels it essential** that the administrative structures and staff at the Commission dealing with forestry matters should be strengthened so that the EU action plan can be implemented effectively;

2.13 **proposes** that the Commission and Member States should create a forest science and technology forum which would bring together representatives of universities, research centres and forest expert groups in order that they may build on their combined expertise relating to the conditions and types of EU forests and the problems facing them, and to suggest initiatives and scientific and technological research programmes: the forum's work must be coordinated and financed by the Commission;

2.14 in view of the strategic relevance of forest policy, and in consideration of the fact that forestry issues fall within the competence of regional and local authorities, it **asks** that the proposed plan be submitted to this Committee for its opinion.

Brussels, 17 November 2005.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Peter STRAUB
