

**Own-initiative opinion of the Committee of the Regions on forest policy: the 20/20/20 targets**

(2010/C 141/09)

## THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes a series of EU activities and political initiatives obliging the Member States to bring their national forestry policies into line with EU objectives;
- highlights that the forestry and timber sector offers significant potential for achieving the EU's 2020 targets and believes that the possible use of ETS-revenues for supporting initiatives in this field should be further explored;
- stresses the importance of promoting multifunctional forestry;
- welcomes the EU initiatives to curb deforestation and forest degradation; draws attention to the fact that brushwood and foliage, which contain almost 90 % of the trace elements taken up by plants during the process of assimilation and building of wood mass, represent a proportion of the biomass harvested in the EU. This could result in soil depletion;
- fully endorses all incentives to use timber and other forestry products derived from sustainably managed forests. This applies particularly to energy and raw materials; urges that consideration be given at the various decision-making levels to setting a date for the introduction of compulsory certification across the EU;
- recommends supporting regions which introduce sustainable forestry policies to mitigate climate change: incentives for businesses in the form of tax breaks, innovation subsidies, preferential contracts for the sale of forestry produce, technical and technological assistance and environmental protection subsidies.

**Rapporteur:** Mr Adam Banaszak (PL/UEN-EA), Member of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie regional assembly

## I. POLITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

### Key recommendations

1. notes that forests – which store over half of the world's carbon in their biomass – can counter climate change, which means that deforestation and forest degradation pose a real danger to the environment and to our climate. It is therefore absolutely vital that we pursue a sustainable forestry policy;
2. believes that natural ecosystems are in delicate balance and the diversity of plant and animal life are crucial to our health and well-being. Native/natural woodlands are important habitats and must be managed in compliance with forest and regional law. Member States and regions should therefore be able to decide not to authorise the planting of genetically modified tree and plant species;
3. welcomes the promotion by the Commission of the use of forest biomass for the production of energy and values the support for such action afforded by the Standing Forestry Committee. This has led to an increase, albeit too modest, in the proportion of renewable energy produced from this source. At the same time, draws attention to the fact that brushwood and foliage, which contain almost 90 % of the trace elements taken up by plants during the process of assimilation and building of wood mass, represent a proportion of the biomass harvested in the EU. An overly large proportion could result in soil depletion. This factor needs to be taken into consideration in the choice of wood harvesting methods. In critical, i.e. depleted forest locations, branches and treetops should remain at the logging site in the forest;
4. highlights that the forestry and timber sector offers significant potential for achieving the EU's 2020 targets. This has yet to be fully exploited, especially the potential for substantially increasing the share of forest biomass used as a raw material and in the production of energy, including plantations of fast growing trees. Notes that the use of wood as a raw material and for energy purposes helps to counteract climate change since it contributes to carbon storage (storage in wood), energy savings – in manufacture, compared with other construction materials, less heating/cooling during the winter/summer (insulation material) - and is a useful substitute for fossil fuels in the generation of heat and electricity (wood fuel, energy recovery from scrap wood). The possible use of ETS-revenues for supporting these and other initiatives should be further explored;
5. considers that the forestry sector needs to be revitalised in a measured manner to boost timber production, which should simultaneously trigger an increase in the amount of energy wood;
6. noting the lack of a common forestry policy, considers that the adoption of the EU Forest Action Plan for 2007-2011 represents a move in the right direction for the European Commission. Recommends, however, that work begin without delay on incorporating the European Commission's cross-sectoral forestry activities into an appropriate legal and structural framework to enable coordinated action in this domain after 2011. In addition to outlining an action plan for subsequent years, an EU coordination body could be established in the field of forestry policy;
7. supports the provision of information and training courses for forest owners on the opportunities offered by forestry which is run in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and thus taking into consideration both biodiversity protection and the production of quality trees and the cultivation of fast-growing species of trees for energy purposes. Recommends that forest owners be given comprehensive support, including advice and financial support to achieve these objectives;
8. supports scientific research and initiatives aimed at developing modern timber harvesting and production technologies which have a smaller environmental impact than traditional methods (including the planting of trees for energy use), as well as those which reduce management costs while promoting sustainable development;
9. welcomes and acknowledges the achievements of existing voluntary certification schemes, and supports their retention, and recommends that this be broadly underpinned by other measures, including financial instruments. Certification could, at a later date, also serve as an instrument to help stem the flow of illegal timber and timber products. Suggests that this should be part of a broader push towards certification on a global scale. Recommends that, in line with such initiatives as FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade), it be made illegal to import or possess timber produced illegally in countries outside the EU. Points out, however, that the legal and economic conditions for certification and Natura 2000 status vary significantly across the various Member States and regions; also points out that the certification of wood products does not always provide ideal support to the overarching goals which are being pursued in the management of protected areas. Recommends, therefore, that these differences and requirements be taken into account in line with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

10. stresses the importance of promoting multifunctional forestry which, in addition to its core tasks in the field of timber production, encompasses other activities of particular importance for both forestry and the economy, such as: tourism, welfare, conservation and leisure activities, hunting, and harvesting of forest fruits and other forest products (e.g. sap, bark, cork etc). It is possible to boost the economic significance of such non-production activities while at the same time broadening the biodiversity of natural habitats, which enhances the development of rural areas.

11. draws attention to the need for local and regional authorities to participate in decision-making on the EU's forestry policy;

### **The most effective methods of harnessing biomass for energy purposes**

12. recommends significantly stepping up EU-level support for the planting of fast-growing trees cultivated in accordance with environmentally sustainable methods for energy purposes which, by creating an additional labour market, will help revitalise rural areas, and can be a factor in the economic development of micro-regions;

13. in the light of the 20/20/20 target, emphasises that all the Member States should participate on a broad front in harnessing biomass for energy production in order to meet the target set for the share of renewable energy in total energy production; nonetheless stresses that the development of energy wood should also be a concern of the regions from the point of view of both the supply of fuel (specific management of forests on the basis of an area's characteristics) and demand (encouragement of a local market for wood fuel by public and private operators from the area);

14. calls for the further promotion of the use of forest biomass for energy generation and for such action to be supported by the Standing Forestry Committee; recommends, however, that measures be taken to limit the proportion of harvested biomass represented by brushwood and foliage;

15. points out that the level of interest shown in the production and use of wood-derived bioenergy will depend on the economic environment in terms of taxation etc in the Member States as well as the level of subsidies for promoting the use of wood-derived fuel and the focus of such support. This support will help quicken the pace of development in rural areas and lead to the sustainable development of the natural environment in such regions. Requests the Member States to ensure that their tax policy does not treat biofuels unfavourably in relation to fossil fuels;

### **Recommended areas of action for the 2007-2011 Action Plan**

16. welcomes the EU initiatives to curb deforestation and forest degradation, which counter both climate change and the loss of areas available for the fixation of carbon dioxide;

17. notes with satisfaction the effects of the monitoring scheme developed for forest preservation, as the state of such forests and their vitality can help ensure high greenhouse gas absorption rates and climate stability;

18. draws attention to ever improving forestry management methods in a number of Member States, where dead organic matter is cleared away for bio-energy use in a measured manner, in accordance with certification and Nature 2000 rules, thereby helping to prevent forest fires. This is done with due regard for the principles of a sustainable economy and the multifunctional nature of forest areas;

19. welcomes a series of EU activities and political initiatives obliging the Member States to bring their national forestry policies into line with EU objectives.

20. bearing in mind that greater forest cover will increase CO<sub>2</sub> absorption, and therefore have a positive effect on the stability of our climate, the Committee of the Regions recommends that more funds be earmarked for maintaining and improving existing forests and for the reforestation of land and planting and tending processes within the framework of rural development policy; however, insists that such support must be coupled with guarantees that it will not degrade biodiversity;

21. takes into account that in certain countries or regions in the EU, forest fires represent the main threat to the conservation of forest ecosystems comprising wood and scrubland; in addition to unfavourable weather conditions, these fires are the result of an excessive accumulation of inflammable material stemming from the failure to use or the abandonment of forested areas on account of their low profitability; as a result fires burn with greater intensity and ferocity, making the task of extinguishing them extremely difficult. It is essential to promote and provide support for preventive forestry, which would make forested areas more resistant to the spread of fire through measures to reduce and alter inflammable plant material and create and maintain fire-breaks. The residual biomass resulting from these measures should be used to produce renewable energy, thus helping to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions;

22. considers that the Member States must be encouraged to continue to develop the monitoring network, taking account of experience to date regarding the monitoring of damage caused by forest fires, insect and fungus infestation and flooding, all of which are harmful to the health and vitality of forests;

23. recommends supporting Member States and regions which introduce sustainable forestry policies which mitigate climate change. Preference should be given to national, regional and local initiatives focused on introducing incentives for businesses in the form of tax breaks, innovation subsidies, preferential contracts for the sale of forestry produce, technical and technological assistance and environmental protection subsidies;

24. recommends the widespread promotion of wood produce, which ensures long-term storage of carbon absorbed during the process of CO<sub>2</sub> assimilation by forest stands, particularly for use in construction;

25. reiterates the previously articulated need for a well co-ordinated cross-sectoral policy approach at local, regional, national and EU and international level that can take due account of global developments, with a view to ensuring the truly sustainable management of forestry resources, integrating climate change mitigation strategies with appropriate adaptation measures. Therefore, calls for the EU to take a more leading role in the international community and encourages the EU Member States in their efforts to comply with the obligations on climate change mitigation undertaken within the framework of the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol and support for adaptation to the effects of climate change (Key Action 6 of the Action Plan for 2007-2011); welcomes the Commission's proposal to create a Global Forest Carbon Mechanism (GFCM) under the UNFCCC framework, based on a permanent-financing scheme and proposes to earmark a significant part of the auctioning revenues from the EU ETS to reduce deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries;

26. points to the need to support forestry policy further, as it is closely linked to the objectives of increasing energy efficiency by 20 % by 2020 and reducing carbon dioxide emissions; this, in turn, is dependent on the large area taken up by forests, which occupy almost 35 % of Europe's land area with a view to achieving this energy efficiency, the thermal use of biomass should be supported in preference to electricity generation; in order to achieve this it should be taken into account in global energy assessments since this is the most efficient use of biomass;

27. draws attention to the fact that more action is needed to curb the increase in biotic and abiotic agents, including those of anthropogenic origin, as outlined in the Forest Action Plan for 2007-2011;

28. notes the existence of a range of effective solutions introduced by the EU, which should be developed further, by broadening the debate to include and examine the new ideas of experts from a variety of countries, particularly those which lead the way in forestry, along with representatives of local and regional authorities from areas where this sector is particularly important;

29. values the significant role played by the MCPFE – Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe – in identifying and publicising forestry issues across Europe, including the EU, and recommends closer cooperation with this body;

30. recommends that work begin on incorporating the European Commission's cross-sectoral forestry activities into an appropriate legal and structural framework to enable co-ordinated action in the area of European forest policy, which will be of key importance on expiry of the Action Plan for 2007-2011;

31. given the cross-sectoral nature of forest issues, recommends that work begin on setting up a body responsible for the EU's forestry policy, equipped with the necessary financial instruments;

#### **Achieving the objectives set through education**

32. is in favour of supporting educational and information campaigns on environmental protection, but notes that not enough has been done to raise public awareness of the advantages of sustainable forestry. This has led to an incomplete understanding within the EU of how it can benefit the development of rural areas;

33. recommends stepping up support for educational and information programmes – particularly those targeting both forest owners and forest managers – on sustainable forestry and the potential contribution which forest biomass can make to achieving the 20/20/20 objectives;

#### **Scientific support as a basic condition for achieving the objectives set**

34. science and forestry play a key role in the process of adaptation to climate change by modifying practices directly linked to forest cultivation, through the selection of tree species appropriate for a given locality, and restoring types of forests that provide greater flexibility in the face of climate change. In particular, the protective function of mountain forests, which act as a barrier against natural hazards, can be significantly influenced;

35. supports the scientific research initiatives exploring the energy potential of various tree species and their methods of cultivation, their adaptability to different climatic and geographical conditions and genetic improvement, leading to high levels of forest biomass gain both for timber production and energy purposes, which makes it possible to increase the amount harvested for both purposes; at the same time though, the environmental effects need to be systematically researched and assessed;

#### **Certification as part of sustainable forestry**

36. fully endorses all incentives to use timber and other forestry products derived from sustainably managed forests. This applies particularly to energy and raw materials. Also supports certification to ensure the proper management of forest areas and prevent the introduction onto the market of timber of unknown origin, but also stresses the management role that local and regional authorities can play;

37. supports a push for global certification of timber and timber products, such as the FLEGT initiative, to combat illegal logging, provided that it is based on the certification systems currently in place (PEFC or FSC), as well as other initiatives to broker an agreement on combating such activity which, alongside measures that give preference to products from certified companies, could represent an effective means of stemming the flow of illegal timber and timber products;

38. urges that consideration be given at the various decision-making levels to setting a date for the introduction of compulsory certification across the EU;

#### **Economic activity related to forest biodiversity and multifunctionality**

39. bearing in mind that greater biodiversity strengthens the resistance of forests, which makes it possible to harness much more of the potential of such habitats, notes the importance of giving priority to such courses of action (broadening biodiversity), taking due account of the multifunctionality of forests and their sustainable development and to this end suggests that new plantations are managed in accordance with environmental sustainability principles to protect soils, plants and animal life;

40. emphasises that forests help counter climate change, inter alia through multifunctional management, as they store 77 % of the world's carbon in their biomass, and play a fundamental role in the global carbon cycle, regulating biological cycles and protecting soil and water; accordingly, it will be impossible to achieve any of the environmental objectives, unless forests are given special attention;

41. calls on the Member States, and the European Union as a whole, to make use of the opportunity which the International Year of Forests in 2011 provides to take a quantum leap forward in the forestry and timber sector.;

Brussels, 4 December 2009.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

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