

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on an EU Forest Action Plan

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On 19 July 2006 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

On 4 July 2006 the Committee Bureau instructed the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment to prepare the Committee's work on the subject.

Given the urgent nature of the work, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Mr Wilms as rapporteur-general at its 430th plenary session, held on 26 October 2006, and adopted the following opinion unanimously.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) points out that an EU Forest Action Plan must be drawn up in an economically, ecologically and socially (sustainably) balanced and equivalent way. The same applies to the practical implementation of the key functions.

1.2 The Committee takes the view that the number of objectives should be increased from 4 to 5, by adding 'Promotion of the forest as a workplace' which would include the 'safeguarding and extension of the vocational skills of those employed in forests' and the 'strengthening and maintenance of rural areas'.

1.3 The Committee proposes that the subject of safeguarding and extending vocational skills of those employed in forests should be taken into account when considering the forest as a workplace. This is a reasonable proposal, since it is ultimately the employees of forest enterprises, ministries and administrations of the Member States who will be expected to put the Action Plan into practice in the rural areas alongside the forest owners.

1.4 The EESC sees the strengthening and maintenance of rural areas as an important factor in ensuring that the EU Forest Action Plan can be successfully implemented on the spot in the Member States. The rural areas chapter of the Action Plan actively ensures that these areas in Europe have a future and do not atrophy and lag behind as ecological and social wastelands.

1.5 The Committee attaches importance to the fact that the EU Forest Action Plan is a totally reliable project and not a mere declaration of will. Reliability is the key to the acceptance and credibility of an EU Forest Action Plan.

2. Introduction

2.1 In drawing up the EU Forest Action Plan the Commission and the Member States formulated a common vision of forestry

and the contribution of forests and forest management to modern society:

2.2 Forests for society: long-term, multi-functional forestry, which fulfils current and future social requirements and guarantees forest-related livelihoods.

2.3 Multi-functional forestry offers economic, ecological, social and cultural advantages. It provides renewable, environment-friendly raw materials and plays an important role in economic development, employment and well-being in Europe, particularly in the rural areas. Forests contribute to the quality of life, in that they provide a pleasant living area, leisure and recreational opportunities and at the same time represent conservation and ecological values. Forests should conserve the spiritual and cultural heritage which they represent.

2.4 In line with the above, the Action Plan pursues four objectives:

- improving long-term competitiveness;
- improving and protecting the environment;
- contributing to the quality of life;
- fostering coordination and communication.

2.5 The five-year Action Plan (2007-2011) consists of a range of key actions which the Commission would like to put into practice together with the Member States. It also contains additional actions which can be carried out by the Member States in accordance with their specific conditions and priorities with the support of existing Community instruments; the implementation of these may also make national instruments necessary.

2.6 With a view to the practical implementation of the EU Forest Action Plan a transparent framework is needed for forest-related measures and decisions at Community and Member State level.

2.7 The Action Plan should serve to inform and develop further targeted forest policy activities between Community measures and the forest policies of the Member States.

2.8 The objectives of the EU Forest Action Plan are the maintenance, support and extension of economic, ecological and social (sustainable) forest management and of the multifunctional role of forests.

2.9 The principle would be to lay down nationally comparable forest programmes as a binding framework for the implementation of international forest-related obligations and rules. The growing importance in forest policy of global and cross-sectoral themes, such as the use of wood as an energy source, requires better consistency, information and coordination.

2.10 Against the background of the great variety of ecological, social, economic and cultural features and the different forms of forest ownership in the EU, the EESC believes that the Action Plan should take account of the need for specific regional incentives and measures for the various kinds of forest management and property relationships. It brings out the important role played by forest owners, forest management employees and the rural area in the sustainable management of EU forests.

2.11 The Committee recommends the Commission to take into account the following five objectives in its EU Forest Action Plan:

- improving long-term competitiveness;
- improving and protecting the environment;
- improving the quality of life through sustainable forest management;
- fostering coordination and communication;
- promoting the forest as a workplace.

3. Actions

3.1 *'Improving long-term competitiveness'*

3.1.1 The Committee believes that potential forest products other than wood, such as the provision of high-quality drinking water or the relationship between CO₂ and the trade in emissions, should in this connection be taken into consideration under this objective.

3.1.2 On Key action 2: 'Encourage research and technological development to enhance competitiveness of the forest sector'

3.1.2.1 In addition to encouragement, the general exchange/knowledge transfer of results of research and technological development between European research centres should also help to strengthen the competitiveness of the forest sector.

3.1.2.2 To improve the general competitiveness of forestry the Action Plan should clarify scientifically, in cooperation with the individual Member States, how many employees with relevant qualifications are needed in the Member States to carry on sustainable forest management on the basis of national laws and regulations in an economically viable way.

3.1.3 On Key action 3: 'Exchange and assess experiences on the valuation and marketing of non-wood forest goods and services'

3.1.3.1 The EESC considers that the forest owner should not be compensated through subsidies for currently non-marketed forest goods and services. The payment for services should be made directly to the forest owner by the individual users and beneficiaries.

3.1.3.2 The Committee advises the Commission to propose to the Standing Forestry Committee that an ad hoc working group be set up to find out and document what activities and experiences in connection with additional marketing possibilities for forest products and services exist in the individual Member States. All forest owners and Member States will benefit from such an exchange of documentation.

3.1.4 On Key action 4: 'Promote the use of forest biomass for energy generation'

3.1.4.1 In the processing of wood residues for energy generation it must be ensured that this use does not lead to impoverishment of soil quality and consequent reduction in the variety of species.

3.1.4.2 When chemically treated wood waste is used as an energy source it should be ensured that in the combustion process dangerous residues are not released into the air and soil.

3.1.4.3 The EESC believes that European decisions must be taken on the basis of scientifically based research results as to who (Member States) uses wood as an energy source, and how and where it is used in a sustainable way. In the developing countries alone 50 % of wood consumed is used up as irreplaceable fuel (energy source) with no corresponding added value. This should not be allowed to happen in the Member States of the EU; it should be ruled out. The most favourable strategic choice in ecological, economic and social terms for European energy production using wood should be assessed in a long-term perspective and put into practice.

3.1.4.4 Before any genetically manipulated seed or plant material is used in forestry it must be ensured that it is ecologically acceptable.

3.1.5 On Key action 5: 'Foster the cooperation between forest owners and enhance education and training in forestry'

3.1.5.1 Cooperation should be encouraged not only with forest owners but also with those employed in forestry. Here the forester and middle management in the rural area have a special role as a link between forest owners and industry; this role should be maintained and promoted through appropriate structures. The mobilisation of wood resources and forest management depend on the availability of qualified management on the spot.

3.1.5.2 Against this background, the EESC argues that the Member States should promote the vocational training and further training of forest owners, forest management, forest workers and forestry enterprises. The Member States should encourage not only forest owners' associations but also employees' professional organisations by setting up advisory services. This encouragement is a component of sustainable (social) development, which is particularly needed in the rural environment.

3.1.5.3 To increase the competitiveness and the economic viability of forestry the Member States can also, as part of their priorities,

- support the development of professional organisations;
- involve professional forestry associations as a matter of course in forest policy decisions;
- promote the individual job profiles of forestry on the basis of the EU Forest Action Plan;
- support the voluntary certification of forestry in recognised systems.

3.2 'Improving and protecting the environment'

3.2.1 The Committee believes that the maintenance, protection and extension of ecological sustainability in forestry and conservation are essential to achieve this objective proposed by the Commission.

3.2.2 The EESC sees voluntary certification of forest enterprises in recognised certification systems as very helpful in guaranteeing, promoting and extending sustainability.

3.2.3 On Key action 8: 'Work towards a European Forest Monitoring System'

3.2.3.1 The EESC welcomes the concept of a European Forest Monitoring System. The relevant international organisations to be involved should be listed by name to ensure that important actors and expertise are not omitted.

3.2.3.2 A European Forest Data Centre should present the collected, scientifically evaluated data to a wide public and make it available as needed in accordance with the guidelines of data protection.

3.2.4 On Key action 9: 'Enhance the protection of EU forests'

3.2.4.1 The important basis for current information on the state of forests is the annually drawn up and published forestry reports of the individual Member States. Therefore, the Committee believes that the drawing up of the individual reports should be promoted through the EAFRD and the Life+ instrument.

3.2.4.2 The transition from single crops, which are susceptible to fire, to mixed stands as a precaution against forest fires should be used and promoted more intensively.

3.3 Concerning the third objective of the Action Plan proposed by the Commission ('Contributing to the quality of life'), the Committee proposes the following new wording: **'Improving the quality of life through sustainable forest management'**.

3.3.1 In its communication, the Commission notes that Member states can encourage investment to enhance the public amenity of Forests. The Committee considers the EAFRD should as well provide support in maintaining and strengthening rural areas, as forests play a very important role in it.

3.3.2 On Key action 10: 'Encourage environmental education and information'

3.3.2.1 The promotion of training and information measures should not be confined to the environmental field; the social field should also be promoted. The two fields overlap, for example the social responsibility of teachers or the cultural dimension require a maximum of training and information in the social field.

3.3.3 On Key action 12: 'Explore the potential of urban and peri-urban forests'

3.3.3.1 In urban areas and conurbations woodland and the stock of wood are clearly decreasing in all Member States. Woodland is at risk both from greater emission damage and particularly from clearing activities. Compensatory land in the same natural area is rarely available, owing to the above average demand for residential and industrial land and the constant extension of infrastructure. Roads, railways and airport extensions play an important part in this trend.

3.4 'Fostering coordination and communication'

3.4.1 On Key action 13: 'Strengthen the role of the Standing Forestry Committee'

3.4.1.1 The EESC considers that, during the implementation of the Action Plan joint meetings, should be organised in which associations and actors from the entire sustainable forest management of Europe meet and represent their respective fields. The same applies to the setting up of ad hoc working groups. These measures would ensure that the Action Plan would be accepted and supported by many actors in forest management.

3.4.2 On Key action 16: 'Strengthen the EU profile in international forest-related processes'

3.4.2.1 A measure to reduce worldwide deforestation would be to establish a European primeval forest protection law laying down among other things under what legal conditions wood from tropical and primeval forests arrives in the EU and is processed and used there. The Commission should examine an appropriate legal initiative and achieve the adoption of a European primeval forest protection law by 2012. The EESC would like to emphasise that the ongoing EU FLEGT process can be a tool to combat worldwide deforestation and deterioration of primeval forests. The FLEGT legislation should work as a system to prevent illegally logged timber entering the EU markets and processing industry.

3.4.3 On Key action 18: 'Improve information exchange and communication'

3.4.3.1 To achieve a multiplier effect, all stakeholders in forest management should be involved and financially supported in events likely to have great influence on the public in the Member States.

3.5 In order to guarantee sustainable forest management in the EU, The EESC believes that the vocational skills of those employed in the forest should be ensured. The strengthening and maintenance of rural areas also plays a decisive role in this connection. Therefore, the EESC calls upon the Commission to take into consideration the following new objective: '**Promoting the forest as a workplace**'.

3.5.1 The Committee stresses that the forest can fulfil all its functions and social tasks only if enough people (forest workers, machine operators, forest management officials and forest managers) are employed in its management and care. These employees should have a basic specialised qualification and receive continuing further training. Of course this also applies to forest owners working with their employees. The qualification should be adapted to the economic, ecological and social requirements of the job. This applies particularly to ensuring conservation in forests.

3.5.2 To achieve this objective, the EESC proposes following new Key actions:

- Key action 19: Promotion of training and further training
- Key action 20: Investigation of the connection between sustainable forest management and vocational training/qualification in the forest sector
- Key action 21: Rural areas

3.5.3 On Key action 19: Promotion of training and further training

3.5.3.1 The Commission and the Member States should increase their promotion of training/further training, research, development and technology transfer in the field of forestry, wood and conservation.

3.5.3.2 The Committee defends that the Commission must support recognised forest management certification systems, which help to guarantee and extend employment by providing indicators of sustainable personnel planning and development in forest enterprises.

3.5.4 On Key action 20: Investigation of the connection between sustainable forest management and vocational training/qualification in the forest sector

3.5.4.1 The Commission should support scientific research on the connection between sustainable forest management and the vocational training/qualification of forest owners and employees in forest management (clarification of requirements).

3.5.4.2 The EESC advises the Commission to make a study of what specific job profiles are needed to ensure that the forest sector is competitive in the long term.

3.5.5 On key action 21: Rural areas

3.5.5.1 Woodland in the Member States is mainly found in structurally weak rural areas. In these areas the forest sector ensures the maintenance of the infrastructure and the employment and income of the forest owners and the rural population. Without economically intact forestry these ecologically valuable tourist areas would be uncoupled from the general development of a country. Likely consequences of this would be migration of population away from the land, an ageing population, neglected woodlands or decline in infrastructure. The destruction of rural

structures leads inevitably to difficulties in the use of wood as a raw material at a time of increasing global demand.

3.5.5.2 The Commission should promote and support investigation and research on the importance of forestry for rural areas.

3.5.5.3 The EESC believes that the Member States should be called upon to guarantee and improve the labour market situation in rural areas. Social hardship arising from continuing structural change is to be avoided. If necessary such developments should be counteracted through coordinated programmes. The attractiveness of rural areas for the population, particularly young people, should be increased.

3.5.5.4 The Committee urges the Commission to support rural areas financially through the EAFRD. On receipt of a request financial support should be given directly to forest owners/enterprises or to combinations of forest enterprises.

4. Evaluation

4.1 The Commission should ensure that all stakeholders of European forestry are represented in the Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork.

Brussels, 26 October 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS
