Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Green Paper on Forest Protection and Information in the EU: Preparing for Climate Change'

COM(2010) 66 final

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On 17 May 2010, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

'*Green Paper on Forest Protection and Information in the EU: Preparing for Climate Change*'

COM(2010) 66 final.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 31 August 2010.

At its 465th plenary session, held on 15 and 16 September 2010 (meeting of 15 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 121 votes to 2 with 4 abstentions.

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The EESC notes that:

— the importance of forests as a renewable natural resource, provider of various ecosystem services and prerequisite for human well-being is expected to grow over the next few decades;

— climate change is predicted to affect the basic functions of the ecosystem, and hence the ecological services provided by forests;

— climate change is predicted to increase uncertainty and the incidence of various phenomena and risks with environmental impacts which transcend national borders such as insect pests, disease, drought, floods, storms and forest fires;

— the role of up-to-date forest information in a context of adaptation in forest management and of research in forest-related decision-making is becoming ever more important.

1.2 The EESC stresses that:

— a balanced approach needs to be applied in catering for the various functions of forests; the focus cannot be exclusively on forest protection;

— maintaining the ecosystem and the ecological services based on it and ensuring the delivery of other public goods requires financial incentives and the provision of information to forest-owners and other operators such as forest contractors and users of wood, who in practice are responsible for decisions concerning forests;

— the knock-on and multiplier effects of climate change can be mitigated by risk prevention and preparing in advance for crisis situations;

— cooperation between states and operators is an important way of controlling cross-border phenomena and improving the production of forest information.

1.3 The EESC proposes that the crucial role of forests and the forest-based sector in a green economy consistent with the EU2020 strategy be taken into account in various areas of EU policy as follows:

— EU forest-related policies, including the Forestry Strategy and Action Plan, should support active forest management and use as well as the competitiveness of the sustainable and environmentally friendly use of wood and wood-based products;

— the coordination of forestry-related matters with other sectors and policies affecting them should be addressed, inter alia, by strengthening the role of the Standing Forestry Committee and other forest-related advisory groups and committees [1] in EU forest-related decision-making;

— the pricing of various ecosystem services and public goods should be taken into account in EU rural policy.

1.4 The EESC recommends that the Commission:

— set an example to the Member States with regard to coordination of forestry-related matters with other sectors, policies, neighbouring states and other operators with regard to anticipating future developments and risk and crisis management;

— support the production of objective information on the forest-based sector, for example within the framework of the 2011 International Year of Forests, in order to improve the acceptance of the forest-based sector among forest-owners, consumers and the general public;

— support the production of information on the properties of wood and wood-based products, for example their climate benefits, in order to promote sustainable consumption and production;

— commission a study on the various operators involved in gathering information on forests and the information they gather;

— develop forest information and planning systems, as well as good practice based on these systems, in partnership with the forest-based sector technology platform, research centres, national organisations and the various operators in the forest-based sector so as to help locate and respond to sudden changes, such as disasters;

— provide more support to Member States and other operators in implementing and monitoring sustainable forestry, and in the production of the information necessary for this and in the harmonisation of information production.

[1] The Advisory Group on Forest and Cork, the Advisory Committee on Community Policy regarding Forestry and Forest-based Industries; Commission Decision 97/837/EC of 9.12.1997, amending Decision 83/247/EEC, OJ L 346, 17.12.1997, pp. 95-96.

2. **Background and objective of the opinion**

2.1 The purpose of this Green Paper is to encourage an EU-wide public debate and to secure views on the future of forest protection and information policy, as well as to provide elements for a possible update of the EU Forestry Strategy, especially in relation to climate issues. The issues raised in the Green Paper follow on from the preceding Commission White Paper *Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action* [2].

2.2 The Green Paper outlines the general situation and significance of EU forests, presenting their specific features and functions, and identifying the major challenges they face. It also examines the threats posed by climate change to the functioning of forests and describes the available forest protection instruments and forest information systems.

2.3 Competence for matters related to forest policy lies primarily with the Member States, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. The EU's principal task is to bring added value to national forestry projects and programmes, by, for instance, raising Member States' awareness of future challenges and making recommendations for timely intervention at EU level.

2.4 The reflections contained in this opinion focus on how climate change will alter European forestry and forest protection and how EU policies should be developed so as to better support Member States' forestry initiatives. It also examines the way in which the EU could facilitate the management of future challenges and what further information is needed. In this context, the aim of EU forest protection should be to ensure that forests continue to fulfil all their productive, socio-economic and environmental functions in the future.

3. **Maintaining, balancing and strengthening various forestry functions (question 1)**

3.1 United Nations conventions recognise the importance of forests in fighting climate change [3] and maintaining biodiversity [4]. At pan-European level and in line with the EU Forestry Strategy, EU Member States have committed themselves to an approach which balances forestry's various functions on the basis of sustainable forestry management and multi-functionality [5]. At EU level, forests' various functions have been taken into account in the EU Forestry Strategy and the EU Forest Action Plan, as well as in the communication on

[2] COM(2009) 147 final.
[3] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
[4] Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).
[5] Forest Europe, Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE).

forest-based industries ([6]). At national and regional level, the functions of forests are managed inter alia through forest programmes. Thus the forest-based sector's own policy framework effectively underpins the maintenance, balancing and strengthening of forests' various functions. By contrast, further efforts are required to coordinate forest-related matters with other sectors and policies affecting them. For example, the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC), other advisory groups and committees on forest-related matters ([7]) and the Commission's Inter-Service Group on Forestry have the potential to do this. The role of the SFC in decision-making on EU forest-related matters should be strengthened. At national level, too, there should be more efficient coordination between sectors on forest-related matters. The example set by the Commission's in pursuing a forward-looking and cross-sectoral approach is important for national operators.

3.2 The importance of forests as a renewable natural resource, provider of ecosystem services and prerequisite for human well-being is expected to grow over the next few decades. For example, responsible consumers ([8]) already account for a substantial share of the market in many European countries. The diversified and sustainable use of forests and forest-based products and services and the stewardship needed to support this create jobs, income and prosperity at various levels in many areas. Forests and forest-based industries, as well as wood production, non-wood products and forest tourism, are particularly important for local communities. It is important, in line with the EU 2020 Strategy, to ensure adequate operating conditions for forest owners, contractors and the wood-consuming industries as there is increasing competition for land available for wood production and for wood to make into processed products and use for energy purposes. The role of information skills is also becoming important. The 2011 International Year of Forests offers an opportunity to improve acceptance of the forest-based sector among consumers and the general public, and to underpin sustainable consumption and production by demonstrating the advantages of wood and wood-based products in addressing climate change issues (e.g. carbon storage, low embedded energy, thermal efficiency, etc.) compared with other materials.

3.3 Forest protection and conservation activities with an environmental dimension have traditionally been ensured through strategic objectives and the rules, guidelines and recommendations designed to achieve those objectives. Over recent years, responsibility for ecosystem services and other public goods has increasingly shifted towards forest owners and contractors. In order to deal with environmental issues, they need new knowledge and information about the various intervention options, such as joint projects to improve cost effectiveness, as well as financial incentives. Challenges include putting an economic value on the protection of biodiversity and river basins, recreational use or carbon storage.

3.4 Forests, wood and wood-based products have a key role to play in climate regulation. Their carbon storage capacity is of particular importance. Wood-based products can be used to replace products made from other materials which are less effective in addressing climate change. For instance, wood-based materials used in construction, interior fittings and furniture provide a relatively long-term carbon sink. To a certain extent, bio-energy derived from timber can also be used to replace energy produced from fossil fuels. As part of the fight against climate change, policy targets and instruments can be used to provide incentives for using 'climate-friendly' materials, such as wood and wood-based products.

3.5 In recent years widespread storm damage and forest fires have also led to increased discussion of the impact of climate change on the forest ecosystem and consequently on forest-related activities. The importance of forests in local and regional climate regulation and soil protection varies from one area to another. Awareness of this crucial role has grown over recent years as understanding of the water cycle and experience with problems of dry regions has increased.

4. **Effects of climate change on forests and the forestry sector (Question 2)**

4.1 Climate change is predicted to increase uncertainty and the risk of various environmental impacts such as insect pests, disease, drought, floods, storms and forest fires. Another challenge is presented by globalisation and the associated transport of wood and forest reproductive material, which accelerates for instance the spread of pests beyond their natural range. If the environmental risks affecting forests and the forest-based sector are realised, there will be many social and economic consequences. The economic effects may be due to changes in the value of assets and in companies' operating conditions. The social effects may be direct, such as altered living conditions resulting from forest damage, or indirect, such as social knock-on effects of changes in the economic situation of operators in the affected area. The rapidity with which environmental risks materialise creates particular challenges, e.g. in relation to markets and logistics. More information about potential causes and effects is needed in order to reduce uncertainty and manage risk in the context of climate change.

([6]) COM(2008) 113 final.
([7]) See footnote 1.
([8]) Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS).

4.2 The abundance of forest resources and efficiency of forest management make it possible for Europe's forests to adapt to various changes. However, substantial regional differences exist within Europe owing to differences in the natural environment and societal factors. For instance, the risk of forest fires in the dry regions of the Mediterranean is expected to increase considerably under the combined impact of climate change and human activity. If droughts become more frequent elsewhere in Europe, spruce-dominant areas, for example, may suffer. If winters become mild and ground frost-free, the logistics of some logging will become more challenging. The risk of fungal and insect damage is also growing. In areas where exploitation of felling potential has declined, storm damage and consequent insect damage may occur. The economic implications for forest owners and local economies may be substantial, and forest diversity may deteriorate. A changing business environment may bring about changes in the relative advantage of different regions and thus in the division of labour between regions and in society.

4.3 The harmful knock-on effects of climate change can be averted through contingency planning. Systematic foresight is useful both in averting undesirable effects and in anticipating sudden changes and natural disasters. The value of designing adjustment and prevention measures based on foresight at different levels takes on increasing significance. It is also important for EU forest-related policies and bodies such as the forest-based sector technology platform to support active forest management and use and to improve the competitiveness of sustainable use of 'climate-friendly' materials such as wood.

4.4 Knock-on and multiplier effects can be mitigated by preparing in advance for crisis situations, e.g. by developing response mechanisms such as crisis management plans, equipment and good practice. It is particularly important in transition and crisis situations to address security issues, including job security.

5. **Tools available for forest protection (Question 3)**

5.1 A solid legal basis and range of instruments exist for forest protection, at both national and EU level. In addition to traditional site protection, use is made of various management restrictions or permit requirements. The problem for the forest-based sector is that existing rules and instruments are fragmented, which produces overlaps and potential incongruities.

5.2 Protection measures based on voluntary mechanisms have proved cost-effective, especially in the case of small forest holdings. But putting such approaches into effect means transmitting skills and information to forest owners, and covering the costs of voluntary protection activity and income loss in full.

5.3 The biggest uncertainty at the moment is the diversity of forests outside protected areas, since not enough information is available on these. In addition, targets for increasing the use of biomass for renewable energy can have implications for forest management and cutting practices, and thus also for diversity.

6. **Management and use of forests (Question 4)**

6.1 Europe's forestry sector typically has a long rotation time, so that, for example, the impact of new forest management techniques may become apparent only after a number of decades. Social and economic conditions are increasing demand for new silvicultural and harvesting techniques in commercial forests, such as the cultivation of short-rotation energy wood or thinning of mature forest. Ecological conditions, such as climate change, can themselves reinforce the environmental impact of new forest management techniques. The state of forests and changes to them are being monitored continually in the context of adapting forest management, so that this can be fine-tuned as necessary to better meet objectives. Decisions about forest management and use are taken by forest owners, who thus need information about the available management options and their potential impacts. Forest planning by forest owners is one possible way forward.

6.2 One way of supporting efforts to preserve the diversity of the gene pool of forest reproductive material and ensure its adaptation to climate change is to tailor the system of criteria and indicators for sustainable forestry to this end.

7. **Adequacy of forest information (Question 5)**

7.1 The production of information on Europe's forests is fragmented between three main players:

— the Commission and agencies and projects funded by it;

— national research and statistics bodies;

— businesses and operators in the forest-based sector.

7.2 Under the subsidiarity principle, the Member States generally have competence in matters that concern them and the EU's role is to provide added value through joint action. National research and statistics bodies such as public forest inventories and statistics offices manage the production of forest information needed for planning and implementing national forestry policy. Current EU forest information covers the condition of forests, including forest fires, and, in some cases, wood production and end uses, such as data on wood-based products. These national bodies also have responsibilities in relation to certain international statistics. Eurostat is responsible for EU forest resource and wood production statistics and the Europe's contribution to global statistics, such as compilation and harmonisation of national data ([9]). The Commission has also supported national bodies in the harmonisation of their data in the context of international commitments ([10]). Both the requirements of harmonised statistics and national and regional differences in the content of data such as diversity indicators must be taken into account when statistics are harmonised. The Commission has put in place monitoring systems for phenomena with a cross-border impact such as forest health ([11]) and forest fires ([12]), as well as joint European information and communication systems ([13]).

7.3 Forest owners and other stakeholders in the forest-based sector generally obtain information concerning or supporting their own activities from national research and statistics organisations or from the private sector. Forest owners and other operators in the forest-based sector also produce and store information in their own real-time information systems. Up-to-date forest information is becoming ever more important in a context of changing business conditions and adaptation in forest management.

7.4 Member States vary with regard to how complete, precise and up-to-date their forest information is. Most countries can report on the standing volume of their forests almost yearly at national level. Some national bodies can also provide detailed and reliable annual reports on national forest health and conditions, production capacity, carbon balance, protective functions of forests, services and viability of their own country's forests ([14]). In some EU countries deficiencies persist in relation to information content, precision and updating. With a view to the harmonisation of international statistics, the Commission is funding R&D projects and cooperation networks ([15]). The main lacunae in terms of forest protection and climate change are forest diversity outside protected areas, sustainable use of bioenergy resources, carbon stocks and sinks, including wood-based products, and rapid location of damaged areas. Support for national operators and the collection of forest information and its harmonisation must be stepped up.

7.5 The challenge in producing harmonised forest information at EU level is the large number of operators involved in gathering data. Thus it is important to carry out a comprehensive study clarifying who is collecting data and what data they are collecting.

Brussels, 15 September 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

([9]) For example, the annual Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire (JFSQ), in cooperation with FAO, ITTO and the UNECE.
([10]) For example, COST E43 (Harmonisation of National Forest Inventories in Europe: Techniques for Common Reporting).
([11]) Forest Focus Community Scheme 2003-2006/7.
([12]) European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).
([13]) European Forest Data Centre (EFDAC) and European Forest Information and Communication Platform (EFICP).
([14]) Forest Europe or regional contribution to global forest resource assessment (GFRA).
([15]) FUTMON, a LIFE+ co-financed project for the Further Development and Implementation of an EU-level Forest Monitoring System; JRC framework contract for the E-Forest Platform; COST network, Improving Data and Information on the Potential Supply of Wood Resources: A European Approach from Multisource National Forest Inventories (USEWOOD).