

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Implementation of the EU Forest Strategy

(2019/C 275/02)

Rapporteur-general: Ossi Martikainen (FI/ALDE), Member of Lapinlahti Municipal Council
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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes, and recognises the need for, the European Commission's report on the implementation of the Forest Strategy, which was published on 7 December 2018. The report leads the Committee to believe that the Forest Strategy has been a useful tool for coordinating various policies. The choice of the strategy's priority areas has proven successful and, on the whole, progress has been made towards meeting objectives. However, even more can be achieved by continuing to take consistent action in Member States, at regional and local level as well as in external relations;

2. further to its previous opinion ⁽¹⁾, which in many respects is in line with the Commission's own assessments, the Committee encourages the Commission to further develop the consistency of forest-related policy areas and measures so that better account can be taken of forests' entire value chain, biodiversity and multiple functions. It is important for the Standing Forestry Committee to be involved in preparing forest-related policies, including those that are indirectly related;

3. calls on the Commission to examine whether the current management of forest issues and the approach to such issues, as well as resources in the EU, are adequate and up-to-date; the degree of actual impact of these resources on the value chain should also be examined. This is due to the growing importance of forests both in the context of global sustainable policies and for Member States and their regions;

4. believes that the Commission should put forward a new, updated forest strategy for the period after 2020 with an even stronger guiding role, which envisages cultivated forests as a distinct category and views as strategic the need to reforest areas at risk of desertification, in view of the clear environmental role assigned to the forest sector. This may require, amongst other things, a reassessment of the way in which the budget is allocated and its effects;

5. calls on the Commission to ensure that Member States, regions and forestry experts, research institutes and organisations are sufficiently represented in the process of preparing the abovementioned strategy, in order to achieve the desired outcomes and to make that process inclusive;

6. with a view to assessing the Forest Strategy's implementation, the Committee sets out the following views on those priorities in the Commission's report which particularly concern the CoR's mandate:

7. Finance and administration

7.1. Local and regional authorities must be closely involved in the design and implementation of forest sector measures led and funded by the EU. Forest owners and those responsible for forest management and administration, including municipalities and regional governments, have a key part to play in strengthening the sustainable use of forests and their unequivocal commitment to the rural population and economy.

⁽¹⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Mid-term review of the EU Forest Strategy (OJ C 361, 5.10.2018, p. 5).

7.2. Local and regional authorities can play a role in boosting the consistency and effectiveness of forest sector measures and act as a link, in a context where private forest ownership is being abandoned and becoming fragmented and compartmentalised in many Member States as a result of structural changes in societies. Potential measures that local and regional authorities could consider include promoting common forms such as forestry clusters and associations and developing the role of the proactive forester. Local and regional authorities must therefore support cooperation in the forest sector; there should be public support for feasibility studies, regional events and promotional activities with a view to developing the many ecosystem goods and services provided by this sector.

7.3. The forest sector needs adequate financing through the CAP, especially rural development funding, as these funds have been used by many regional and local actors to strengthen forestry in their regions and boost sustainable use. As the CAP becomes more flexible at national level, the forest sector may play an even bigger role in rural development measures in many regions; on the other hand, its role may decline. This is important for rural employment, regional economies and sustainable development. It is therefore a key moment for ensuring adequate financing of forestry measures as part of rural development funding in the CAP. In order for national CAP programmes to have a climate and environmental impact, there needs to be a contribution from regional and local authorities and cooperation between different levels of governance. Funding options for the forestry sector should also be publicised at every level of government so that they can be used fully and appropriately.

7.4. The CoR points out that many European Member States have a very poor forest road network and in this regard emphasises the need to finance a European study about the evaluation of forest road network.

7.5. The forest sector also offers considerable potential to make use of funds under the EU's research and innovation programmes, in addition to earlier tools relating mainly to the CAP; besides the CAP, the forest sector must also be able to make use of specific resources under Horizon, LIFE+, Erasmus+ the Structural Funds and the Solidarity Fund.

8. **Local and regional economies, green economy, employment**

8.1. Forests have a key role to play in the development of Europe's bioeconomy and biodiversity and that of its regions and in the transition to a low-carbon, green economy. Local and regional governments could contribute to, among other things, regional sustainable development plans, bioeconomy strategies, education, ecologically sustainable construction, carbon sequestration in long-life wood products, renewable energy deployment and the promotion of SME entrepreneurship in the forest sector. Where this is suitable, regional cooperation groups should be set up in the forest sector, which would include — in addition to forest enterprises, forest owners and regional and local governments — municipalities, regional authorities regional academies, universities and NGOs, as well as private businesses in sectors that use forest-based raw materials and products.

8.2. Many of Europe's rural regions suffer from depopulation and job losses. A shift towards forest-based products, in construction and energy production for example, would generate employment and tax revenues for sparsely populated regions too. The same is true of the wider green economy, where forests are also an important asset for tourism, biodiversity, recreation and citizens' wellbeing. As the EU's third largest employer (with over 3,5 million jobs), the forestry sector has a significant effect on Europe's social and territorial convergence. The Forest Strategy must also allow for the development of all forest-based ecosystem goods and services, in order to give a fresh start to and support the economy.

8.3. The expected increase in demand for wood and biomass must go hand-in-hand with sustainable forest management, which in public forests can be certified by the forest administration and in private forests by private certification mechanisms.

8.4. Different administrative levels should work together: good practices and results at regional level should influence how the EU and Member States allocate funding to promote innovation and technology in the forest sector, and to link up the different ways in which forests are used. This could also create workable and more accessible financial tools for regions in order to develop the forest sector. New, well-targeted measures are needed in the forest sector in order to achieve the objective of a carbon-neutral Europe by 2050. The tasks and powers of local and regional authorities vary between Member States, but everywhere a comprehensive and consistent strategic approach should be sought that brings together the common goals and needs of different levels with respect to matters including infrastructure, information systems and information sharing, as well as authorities' tasks such as issuing permits and oversight. All Member States and sectors of the economy should contribute to achieving the CO₂ emission reduction targets balancing considerations of fairness and solidarity.

8.5. Considers that improved communication regarding the importance of the sustainable management of forest areas, together with the possibility of extending, implementing and coordinating information campaigns on the multifunctional nature of forests and the many economic, social and environmental benefits provided by forest management, is becoming a shared requirement at all institutional levels of the EU.

9. Biodiversity, climate change, forest health

9.1. The CoR underlines the crucial importance of promoting the proper management of forests and of integrating agricultural and forestry policies with hydrogeological and climate risk management policies.

9.2. The CoR takes note of the Commission's observation that, in terms of biodiversity, the desired progress has not been achieved, despite major efforts to preserve different types of forests and habitats, including through the Natura 2000 network and the Birds and Habitats Directives. The Commission should provide a more detailed assessment of where results have been achieved, what instruments would be needed to achieve positive developments and whether the measures have been balanced in terms of the prevalence and rarity of forest habitats across the whole of the EU, with a special focus on regions where the greatest wealth of species is concentrated, as is the case in the outermost regions. Fund research on the wide-scale assessment of the state of forests and their ecosystem services especially in new Member States. This should all be done with a view to maintaining and consolidating environmentally valuable natural heritage, by developing existing ecological networks.

9.3. Forests have a key role to play in tackling climate change, through sequestration, storage and substitution of CO₂ emissions. Climate impacts must be made a cross-cutting theme of sustainable forestry, in which the possibilities of forests are considered in a comprehensive way: how fossil-based construction materials and fossil fuels and their related products can be replaced; how forest management affects carbon sequestration; and consequently how to encourage/compensate owners who practise sustainable forest management (SFM) compared to those who do not; what threats climate change poses to forests; how the potential for growing endemic tree species can be ensured and to what extent non-native tree species can be used in a compensatory way, etc.

9.4. The CoR calls on the European Commission to fully involve regions and local authorities in implementing the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) ⁽²⁾ and the LULUCF regulation ⁽³⁾, setting emission reduction targets for 2030 and developing concrete initiatives to achieve them.

9.5. Climate change and loss of forest diversity may expose large areas of forests to fire, storm, disease and pest-related damage. Given such eventualities, administrative decisions must always weigh up the alternative risks of not acting. Preparations should be made for such eventualities by maintaining up-to-date legislation to support forest planning and prevent such damage, and through funding which could be earmarked for preventing damage, managing emergencies and devastated areas, promoting restoration and reforestation, and for offsetting the economic problems facing large disaster-stricken regions. In this regard there is a need to fund at regional level a hazard map of potential risks. Active forestry management can serve as a valuable early warning and preventive tool in improving the health of forests.

9.6. The natural capital and ecosystem services of forests to society should be better explained to society, and where possible the links between local communities and forests owned or not by these should be tightened.

9.7. Underlines the primary importance of bottom-up actions in the field of disaster risk management, as well as EU instruments to complement them if a disaster surpasses the capabilities of a Member State. The list of EU instruments that are particularly helpful when it comes to dealing with storms and wildfires includes the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, the EU Solidarity Fund and pilot projects financed by the European Commission aiming at removing administrative and legal obstacles to disaster risk management in cross-border areas;

9.8. An EU Action Plan on deforestation and forest degradation is urgently needed, in line with the request made by the European Parliament and key stakeholders, in order to further assess the environmental impact of the consumption of products and raw materials in the EU likely to contribute to deforestation and forest degradation outside the EU. Hence, the CoR asks the new European Commission to include this request amongst its political priorities.

⁽²⁾ Regulation (EU) 2018/842 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by Member States from 2021 to 2030 contributing to climate action to meet commitments under the Paris Agreement and amending Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 (OJ L 156, 19.6.2018, p. 26).

⁽³⁾ Regulation (EU) 2018/841 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework, and amending Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 and Decision No 529/2013/EU (OJ L 156, 19.6.2018, p. 1), <https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/land-use-land-use-change-and-forestry-lulucf>.

10. International and interregional cooperation in the forest sector

10.1. It is important for the EU to continue its work to ensure that there is cooperation and a basis for agreement — both across Europe and around the world — on the forest sector and the trade in forest products, and to consolidate the principles of sustainable forestry in its neighbourhood, its economic external relations and its development policy. *Forest Europe*, forest certifications, the UN's strategic forest plan for 2030, and global objectives on forests are examples of possible areas of influence.

10.2. Many of the important forest areas in the EU are confined to its external borders, whereas forest types, the forest-based economy and threats to forests often go beyond these borders. It is important for regional and local authorities in border regions to be able to make more effective use of the EU's external relations programmes in the forest sector.

10.3. Representatives of regional and local authorities must be kept closely involved in preparing, implementing and monitoring EU international commitments in the forest sector, and permanent procedures must be put in place in order to meet this objective in practice.

10.4. It would be crucial to foster national and regional cooperation in the EU to facilitate the exchange of skills and bolster competitiveness of the regions. Strengthened networks would also hasten readiness to provide support as it comes to tackling of natural disturbances such as forest fires, storms, droughts and floods.

11. Education and communication

11.1. There is a need to promote social demand, as this would justify and uphold the active role played by forests regarding the climate and economic challenges we face.

11.2. This can only be achieved by an unprecedented communication and education effort on the role of the forest sector in mitigating climate change and in the transition to a bioeconomy based on natural resources, by means of campaigns not only at national and international level, but also at local and regional level, as this is closest to citizens.

11.3. Communication and education measures should be aimed primarily at overcoming two existing cognitive barriers: transforming the negative perception of the exploitation of wood into recognition of forestry as a science-based sustainable management system, and reconciling the opposition between conservation and management by applying the concept of sustainable forest management which can make them compatible.

11.4. Forestry professionals with knowledge of both forestry and sustainable forest management must form part of the communication and education teams.

Brussels, 11 April 2019.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ
