

Vienna Declaration of the European Forest Owners' on the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030

Sustainable management of European forests is a global example of success. European forests provide a diverse range of ecosystem services for society, the environment and the economy. Furthermore, they are an essential factor for the bio-based economy as a key element in the fight against climate change.

On 16th July, the European Commission presented the new EU Forest Strategy 2030. In the strategy, suggestions made by the Member States and the European Parliament are only reflected rudimentarily. In addition, the needs and expectations of 16 million forest owners have been largely ignored. However, the great challenges that society faces such as the global climate and biodiversity crisis can only be overcome in cooperation with these.

The EU Forest Strategy 2030 significantly alters the current balance between socio-economic and ecologic functions of multifunctional forestry moving towards an almost exclusive propagation of environmental concerns, whilst the economic aspects seem to be essentially overlooked, jeopardising the long-term viability of European forests and forestry. As a result of the intended actions, the role of forests as the source of many forest owners' income will lose its value. Therefore, new political approaches must be established that involve forest owners and managers from the beginning and as equals in the strategy's implementation and all the related processes. As representatives of European forest owners and managers, we call for the following points to be duly considered as a precondition for all further steps in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy 2030:

1) Acknowledging the Facts

We are committed to protecting the climate and biodiversity. European forest area has increased by 14 million hectares since 1990 and timber stocks by 8.3 billion solid cubic metres. Most parameters relevant to biodiversity have improved. Compared to many other sectors and land uses, we European forest owners and managers have made remarkable progress at our own expense.

The forest owners' and managers' previous achievements in terms of society, the environment and the economy must be acknowledged. We do not want to be prevented from practising sustainable forest management using our rich expertise and thus be discriminated by additional bureaucracy, unnecessary restrictions and one-dimensional restraints.

2) Pushing Real Climate Protection

Climate change must be countered immediately by moving away from oil, coal and gas. The energy transformation towards renewable sources must be implemented and the transition to bioeconomy must be boosted. With the renewable raw material that is wood, the European Union's forests lay the most important foundation for these goals. Therefore, active, sustainable forest management has to be acknowledged as a key component for the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy. Setting aside forest areas and limiting forest management activities can only contribute to the solution to the climate and biodiversity crisis to a very short-term and limited extent and is to be based on contractual nature conservation.

In order to support the breakthrough in a comprehensive bioeconomy, the future use of forests' great potential has to be secured. Sustainable wood production must not be hampered because we are in global competition and such actions would constrain other forest services as well.

3) Rewarding Performance

Our forest ecosystems provide a multitude of services to society. They are not only a popular recreational area, but also offer protection against natural hazards, filter air and water, and supply the remarkable raw material that is wood. Due to the climate crisis, providing all the demanded ecosystem services for free is becoming increasingly difficult.

If society demands special ecosystem services from us, these have to be rewarded with a fair payment. Regulatory directives should only be the exception while contractual solutions must take priority. Full compensation for any resulting loss of assets and income has to be secured through proper financial tools.

4) Taking Expertise into Account

Forest management in Europe is characterised by high professional competence – both know-how and experience – across generations, as well as a high diversity of different habitats. For decades Member States' forest policies have been taking into account the regional, social, and technical conditions and the forests' value for its managers, the environment and the population.

The Council conclusions of 11th November and 15th April 2019 must therefore be included in all follow-up activities on the EU Forest Strategy. Especially the technical competence and field experience we, the forest owners, managers, and our organisations, have must be duly considered in the work on future legal acts, regulations and other measures with a direct influence on forest management. In particular, this applies to the ongoing design of political processes resulting from the EU Forest Strategy.

5) Creating Forests Fit for the Future

Climate-fit forests are vital for the future of European society – from an economic, social, and environmental perspective. In this process, European forest owners are key players and carry the responsibility to actively manage the future economic and ecological transformation. To enable this, an appropriate legal framework, financial support and the security of being able to derive an economic income from ones property are needed. This is also stated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

As forest owners, we are ready to foster forests for the future and for following generations through our daily commitment and hard work. However, this means that we must be granted the right to use and freely dispose of our property and do our job.

6) Strengthening Proven Systems

Despite the ongoing effects of climate change, European forests are in good condition and constantly develop, which has also been confirmed by international and national forest monitoring and reporting systems. This is the result of sustainable forest management, intergenerational thinking as well as the proven expertise of forest owners and managers regarding the complexity of forest ecosystems. Any further development must be based on all of the declarations and decisions within the FOREST EUROPE process (former MCPFE) that have been approved and signed so far.

Sustainable active forest management, as defined in the FOREST EUROPE process, must continue to be the common thread running through all intended approaches in order to master the diverse and multifunctional tasks of forests in the future.

7) Respecting Competences

Forests in the European Union are as diverse as their regions and locations. The political responsibility and competence for these forests and involved citizens lies with the Member States, which should also make all forest-related decisions in accordance with existing national legislation and based on regional and local technical expertise.

Forest-based EU politics are unquestionably subject to the subsidiarity principle. The Member States' competence in this area must be respected and the subsidiarity principle duly implemented, not only mentioned in writing. This is the only way for the EU to live up to its motto „United in diversity“.

This declaration is endorsed by the participants of the European forest owners' conference on the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030, held in Vienna on Oct. 4th 2021:

Participating countries:

Austria // Croatia // Czech Republic // Estonia // Finland // France // Germany // Hungary // Latvia // Lithuania // Norway // Poland // Romania // Slovenia // Spain // Sweden

Participating EU-Organizations:

CEPF - Confederation of European Forest Owners // COPA-COGECA - European Farmers and Agri-Cooperatives // ELO - European Landowners' Organization // EUSTAFOR - European State Forest Association // FECOF - European Federation of Forest-Owning Communities // USSE - Union of Foresters of Southern Europe