Trigger the full potential of forestry measures under Rural Development Policy post 2013

The European forest owners welcome the overall goal of the European Commission and European Parliament’s proposal for the future Rural Development Policy. However, we feel that this proposal does not yet trigger the full potential of the European Union’s forests.

Europe’s forests have a great potential to contribute to the EU 2020 Strategy by generating employment in rural areas, mitigating climate change and producing renewable energy and are an integral part of the bioeconomy. Furthermore, EU forests largely safeguard biodiversity. The Rural Development Policy is the main EU policy instrument that has the capacity to improve the contribution of EU forests to these overarching targets. Therefore it should help to maintain the economic and competitive viability of forestry and rural areas whilst preserving cultural landscapes and protecting and enhancing ecosystem services.

European forest owners recommend that the following actions be included in the future Rural Development Policy:

**Supporting the competitiveness of forestry**

Europe’s forestry sector provides about 3.5 million jobs and thereby significantly contributes to the socio-economic well-being in rural areas. Only a competitive and economically viable forest sector is able to fulfil its multifunctional role. For these reasons, we call for the inclusion of the competitiveness of forestry into the objectives and priorities of the new Rural Development Policy. The economic prosperity of forestry is a prerequisite for the sustainable development of the environmental and social functions of forestry in Europe’s rural areas.

**Overcoming structural disadvantages of fragmented forest holdings**

Europe’s forests are an important source of renewable resources, which can be used for multiple purposes including construction and renewable energy (EU 2020 targets). By substituting energy intensive and fossil fuel-based products with wood products, Europe’s forests have a key role to play in mitigating climate change. However, a major challenge in increasing the mobilization of wood from the EU forests is the scattered and small-scale forest holdings structure. To overcome this structural disadvantage, support to the grouping of small forest owners into cooperatives and producer groups has to be further improved. Additionally the successful establishment of producer groups, as well as the expansion of already existing groups, should be supported for adequate time spans (10 instead of 5 years) to better reflect the long-term processes in forests and forest management. The integration of the forest sector in knowledge transfer, informative actions, advisory services and cooperation is
essential in further strengthening the implementation of sustainable forest management, securing wood mobilisation and improving the provision and marketing of ecosystem services.

**Securing and improving the provision of ecosystem services**

Europe’s forest owners provide multiple services to society such as biodiversity, drinking water, clean air, recreational space and cultural landscapes. Hence, forest owners are of the opinion that an improved compensation for costs incurred and income foregone in forest areas affected by environmental legislation, such as the Habitat Directive (e.g. Natura 2000), as well as payments for forest environmental services are essential to ensure the multifunctionality of forestry. Due to complex bureaucratic requirements and low payment levels the uptake until today of available forestry related funds in the CAP period (2007-2013) has been very low and the EC targets will not be reached. The new Rural Development Policy should overcome this shortfall by simplifying the implementation requirements and improving the attractiveness of the measures by increasing the payment level. The positive effect of a higher uptake of e.g. Natura 2000 measures could help the EU to reach its biodiversity targets for 2020. Additionally the EC intention to set forest management plans as a requirement for all those who apply for EU funding contradicts the attempts to simplify the support schemes. Sustainable forest management is secured by national or equivalent forest legislation.

**Actively managing climate change induced catastrophes to Europe’s forests**

Europe’s forests are increasingly threatened by climate-change induced catastrophes, such as forest fires, storms and pests or globalization induced impacts like invasive species. The new Rural Development Policy must take into account the importance of risk management in forestry. The proposed support to the prevention from forest fires, pests and natural disasters must be overhauled while, the threshold of destruction of forest potential caused by catastrophic events should be defined by the member states and not the Commission.

**Securing adequate funding for private forest owners**

Unattractive payment levels for forest-related measures and the failure to capture funds for Pillar II will lead to a poor achievement of the new Rural Development Policy targets, particularly in terms of strengthening and maintaining the economic viability of the rural sector and the provision of multiple ecosystem services. Therefore, a proper and balanced uptake of forest related measures, as proposed in the new Rural Development Policy in national rural development programs, is essential. Moreover, it should be ensured that the scarce forest related Rural Development funds in particular are used to support private forest owners and their cooperatives.

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