

BACKGROUND PAPER FOR PRESS RELEASE
INFORMAL CONFERENCE OF FOREST MINISTERS
VIENNA, 5 OCTOBER 2021
FORESTS ARE MORE THAN CLIMATE PROTECTION

- Forests are Europe's most dominant landscape feature: They cover around 40 percent of the EU's territory and have a decisive influence on its citizens' quality of life. They provide unique habitats for animals and plants and offer renewable resources as well as clean air and other benefits for human health. They protect us against natural hazards, safeguard many jobs and are a major source of recreation.
- Forests in the EU and sustainable forest management significantly contribute towards achieving the goals of the European Green Deal.
- The dynamic concept of sustainable forest management has played a pioneering role for generations. The key lies in the balanced integration of the three components of sustainability: ecological, social and economic aspects.
- At EU level there will be a new forest strategy for the period after 2020, which should also include aspects to achieve the goals of the Green Deal. The new "EU Forest Strategy 2030" was presented by the Commission in July 2021 and has sparked concern, particularly among forest rich member states. The reason for this was, amongst other, the unbalanced consideration of all three key components of sustainability as well as the omission of the subsidiarity principle and the non-involvement of the member states in the drafting of the forest strategy.
- Together with the support of 11 other member states (AT, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, HU, LV, PL, RO, SK), a letter was sent to the Commission in which the main concerns were raised.
- At the initiative of the Austrian Minister of Forestry, Elisabeth Köstinger, a few of the most forest rich countries in the EU have been invited to an informal conference of Forest Ministers in Vienna. Together with Minister Elisabeth Köstinger, the forest ministers of Germany, Finland, Sweden, Slovakia and Slovenia discussed European forest policy.
- In addition, the Conference of Forest Owners' Associations of Europe was held in parallel with the Conference of Forest Ministers. Germany, France, Finland, Sweden, Slovakia and of course Austria will submit a joint statement to the EU Commission as a result of the forestry conference, which is also supported by the associations of forest owners in Europe.

Quotes by Ministers:

Elisabeth Köstinger (AT)

- *"I am committed at all levels to ensure that all three components of sustainable forest management are also taken into account in the future - that is, the social, economic and environmental aspects. The Commission failed to develop the strategy in cooperation with the EU member states."*
- *"The approach chosen by the Commission is one-sided and does not do justice to the unique characteristics of forests and structures in each member state. The focus is almost entirely on environmental aspects, while socio-economic factors are largely ignored. The EU forest strategy must address forests and their sustainable management in a holistic and balanced way (including all three dimensions of sustainability). It must address forest-related measures in a coordinated, coherent and structured manner. The strategy also fails to mention the unique contribution of wood products to the transition to a greener and more circular economy. "*
- *"Any measure should be evaluated against the three key components of sustainable forest management: ecological, social and economic aspects. These must all be considered in a balanced way. Forests are not only a CO2 sink but also the basis of livelihood for farmers. The renewable resource wood is also generated in the forest. I see incoherence with other policy areas. On the one hand, the forests in Europe are to be reduced to their sink capacity and, on the other hand, the Commission is pushing trade agreements, which might lead to more deforestation. "*

Minister Julia Klöckner (DE)

"Sustainable forest management in Germany and Europe is a success story. Above all, because we rely on the great knowledge of experts on the ground and on a clear guiding principle: the forests in our country are not only managed sustainably, but multifunctional, given their many services to the environment, biodiversity, the economy, the climate and society. Ecological, economic and social aspects are of equal importance. Only in this way can we use the full potential of forests and wood. Increased building with wood, for example, is active climate protection because CO2 is bound in the long term. Furthermore, regional value chains and supply chains help reduce emissions."

"It is therefore necessary to further strengthen regional forestry expertise and thus active sustainable forest management. This is where Europe's forestry ministers will take the lead

across-borders. What we don't need, however, is more bureaucracy from Brussels. It is harmful to acceptance and first and foremost to our forests, if decisions in the EU-Forest Strategy are made without involving local experts. We are therefore clearly against softening the principle of subsidiarity in this area."

Minister Jari Leppä (FI)

"Forest policy belongs to national competence of the Member States. It is important, that we reinforce our cooperation, and share the good practices and solutions with each other, while taking sustainability in its all aspects into consideration. In addition, it is crucial that market-based incentives encourage forest owners to manage their forests. National forest inventories serve as a basis for sound policy-making," Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, Mr. Jari Leppä emphasized.

Minister Julien Denormandie (FR)

"Our forests provide multiple services to our societies, and encompass all three aspects of sustainable development: environmental, economic and social. Further cooperation between Member states, European institutions, stakeholders are key to be able to address all the challenges we face. I fully support the common declaration launched by Elisabeth Köstinger as it strengthens this common vision. "

Minister Samuel Vlčan (SK)

"Allow me to mention one particular issue which is the concept of close-to-nature forestry. We have defined this concept in our national law, which might be an inspiration for others in the European Union."

"I am convinced that close-to-nature forestry is a great response to address a number of current challenges, such as protecting and enhancing biodiversity and to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts. Moreover, the close to nature forestry has a great potential to improve water retention function of forests and thus prevent soil erosion and protect water supplies."

Minister Ibrahim Baylan (SE)

"The Swedish government has set out the ambitious goal of becoming the first fossil-free welfare state. We are committed to seeking solutions to the challenges ahead. One important part of this is to promote and incentivise the circular bio-economy as an essential part of achieving of the European Green Deal and a key feature in the transformation to a fossil-free and resource efficient society."

"The forest is multifunctional. It is important for our work to mitigate climate change, for our biodiversity, our well-being and our economy. It provides a backbone for vibrant rural

development, as its value-chain and related forest-based industries and other sectors such as tourism creates jobs and growth all over the country, not least in rural areas. The multifunctionality of our forests and forestry must hence be acknowledged and duly reflected in EU policies relating to forests. The key instrument to promote multifunctionality is the well-established concept of sustainable forest management.”

“As nations with large forestry sectors, we can contribute with knowledge and practical know-how on the road ahead. As clearly stated in the joint statement, cooperation amongst EU Member States, with the European Commission and other relevant partners, also at pan-European level is needed in order to safeguard a prosperous development of our forests and the forest-based sector.”

Minister Jože Podgoršek (SI)

"Slovenia supports the promotion of sustainable, multifunctional and close-to-nature forest management, which takes into account all three pillars: the ecological, social and economic. Slovenia traditionally supports active forest management, which enables us to ensure all forest functions. Forests play an important role in achieving national, European and global objectives. Sustainable, close-to-nature and multifunctional forest management contributes to creating sinks, supporting the increased use of timber products, replacing fossil materials and fuels, as well as protecting biodiversity, ensuring green jobs and developing bioeconomy and rural development, where wood is an important source of income for farms and forest owners.

It is crucial that Member States cooperate and exchange views on how to adapt forests to climate change as much as possible. In achieving the goals, it is important to involve stakeholders. National processes, such as Forest Dialogue, which is successfully implemented in Slovenia, can serve as examples of good practice. In Slovenia, we carry out discussions with all stakeholders. Forestry and the entire forest-wood chain together with tourism influence rural conservation and development, and represent one of the pillars of green, circular and digital economy."