Forests: protection and monitoring of atmospheric pollution and fires, action 2003-2008 Forest Focus

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This report has been prepared by the Commission in accordance with requirements set out in Regulation No (EC) 2152/2002; the “Forest Focus” Regulation. The main purpose of the Regulation is to establish a Community scheme for the long-term monitoring of European forests between 2003 and 2006. Regulation No (EC) 2152/2002 has now been repealed and its main provisions taken over by the LIFE+ Regulation. This analysis, therefore, focuses on the four year “Forest Focus” scheme only.

To recall, Forest Focus centred on the monitoring of atmospheric pollution and how this affects forests, monitoring forest fires, their causes and effects and examine aspects relating to forest fire prevention. The scheme also foresaw the development of new monitoring instruments relating to soil monitoring, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, climate change and the protective role of forests. The Member States are still carrying out a number of studies and experiments, the outcome of which will be known in the course of 2008.

Whilst the Commission was responsible for coordinating, monitoring and developing the scheme the Member States were required to designate a competent authority to manage the national programme. The total Forest Focus budget over the 4-year period was EUR 65 million, including EUR 9 million for fire prevention measures. The EU contribution towards the cost of national programmes stood at between 50% to 75% - depending on the type of activity funded. Forest Focus activities, for each national programme, were divided into a number of activities including: project coordination and management (activities related to the coordination of the national programme); Level I monitoring network (installation and maintenance of a systematic grid net); Level II plots involving intensive monitoring (such as crown condition measurements); forest fire prevention activities (including the European Forest Fire Information System); and Studies and demonstration projects (such as identifying some of the causes of forest fires).

Although various studies under Forest Focus will not be completed until 2008, the Commission undertook an external evaluation of the programme’s management and forest conditions for the year 2005. The evaluation was carried out by one UK and one Finish research institute. This evaluators made the following findings:

- The management of the programme has been cost effective.
- Monitoring activities should include, not only the health of forests, but air pollution as well. Other parameters relating to climate change, biodiversity and the protective functions of forests should also be included in future monitoring activities.
- Data from national forest inventories should be taken into account when forest monitoring takes place.
- The monitoring scheme should be continued.

The evaluators expressed some concern that in repealing the Forest Focus Regulation Member States would no longer be obliged to undertake a co-ordinated, EU-wide, inspection of Europe’s forests. The main recommendations, as set out by the evaluators, has therefore been taken on board and incorporated into the LIFE+ Regulation. In addition, the EU has adopted the “EU Forest Action Plan 2007-2011”. Indeed, the purpose of Action 8 is the establishment of a European Forest Monitoring System.

Further, LIFE+ provides for the establishment of national forest inventories. Given that LIFE+ is based on voluntary participation, the report predicts that, in future, monitoring will be more policy specific driven and include parameters such as climate change, biodiversity and the protective function of forests – rather than a simple continuation of observations based on traditional parameters (as was the case under the "Forest Focus" scheme).

As far as the management of the scheme is concerned, the report notes that the average financial commitment per programme is low. For 2003-2004 it amounted to approximately EUR 0.5 million per contracting party ranging between EUR 20 000 and EUR 2.7 million. For 2005 it was EUR 0.4 million ranging between EUR 20 000 and EUR 2.1 million and for 2006 EUR 0.4 million ranging from EUR 28 000 to EUR 2.1 million. Of this amount, approximately 7% was devoted to the co-ordination and management of the national programmes.