Commission Green Paper "On forest protection and information in the EU: preparing forests for climate change"

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PURPOSE : Green Paper on options for a European Union (EU) approach to forest protection and information.

CONTENT : many forests throughout Europe will increasingly be challenged by climate change. Preparing to meet these challenges now is the best way to ensure that forests can continue to deliver all their functions. The purpose of this Green Paper is to launch the debate on options for a EU approach to forest protection and information in the framework of the EU Forest Action Plan, as announced by the Commission in the White Paper "Adapting to Climate Change: towards a European Framework for action" . Climate change has had and will have an impact, inter alia, on forests. As these impacts will have socio-economic and environmental consequences, it is opportune to prepare now so that EU forests can continue to perform all their functions under changing climatic conditions.

The Green Paper notes that forests serve multiple and inter-related social, economic and environmental functions. They provide jobs, income and raw materials for industry and for renewable energy. They protect soil, human settlements and infrastructure, regulate freshwater supplies and conserve biodiversity. In climate terms, forests act as 'sinks' that absorb carbon dioxide when they are growing but they are sources of CO_2 when they are cut, burned or damaged by storms and pests. Forests also regulate local and regional weather.

Forests and other wooded areas cover some 176 million hectares of the EU or more than 42% of the EU's land area. EU forests have continuously expanded for over 60 years and today account for 5% of the world's forest area. Most EU forests have grown in terms of their wood volume and carbon stock, thus removing more CO_2 from the atmosphere. Globally, however, the loss of forests - mostly in developing countries - and other land use changes are now responsible for about 12-15% of global CO_2 emissions.

The average temperature in Europe has risen by almost 1°C during the past century and the most optimistic projection sees an increase of 2°C by 2100. This rapid rate of man-made climate change is overwhelming the natural ability of ecosystems to adapt. It will alter the suitability of whole regions for certain forest types, forcing a shift in the natural distribution of tree species and leading to changes in the growth of existing forest stands. Extreme events such as storms, forest fires, droughts and heat waves are expected to become much more common and/or severe, thus adding to pressure on forests.

Competence for forest policy lies primarily with the Member States. The role of the EU is limited and designed principally to add value to national forest policies and programmes by:

- monitoring and possibly reporting on the state of EU forests;
- anticipating global trends and drawing MS' attention to emerging challenges and,
- proposing and possibly coordinating or supporting options for early action at EU scale.

The debate launched by the Green Paper should therefore focus on how climate change modifies the terms of forest management and protection in Europe and how EU policy should evolve to enhance its contribution to Member States' forest-related initiatives. What challenges do we face, how can the EU help address them, what are our additional information needs? This Green Paper:

- identifies briefly the general situation and global relevance of forests;
- describes the characteristics of EU forests and their functions;
- identifies the main challenges faced by EU forests in a changing climate and how they could compromise forest functions;
- presents an overview of the tools available to ensure forest protection, and of the existing forest information systems that could be used to address the challenges and monitor environmental impacts and effects of actions.

In addition, it raises a series of questions relevant to developing options for future forest protection and information in the EU under a changing climate. The responses from EU institutions, Member States, EU citizens and other interested stakeholders will inform and guide Commission considerations regarding any additional action at EU level to better prepare EU forests for climate change, and enhance the fulfilment of their functions. It may also provide input for discussions concerning the possible update of the EU Forest Strategy on climate related aspects.

The Commission will publish stakeholders' contributions on Internet and will provide its own feedback of the main outcomes of the consultation.

The results of the public consultation will help shape the further work of the Commission regarding the contribution the EU can make to forest protection under a changing climate, including the information required to achieve this. Member States and stakeholders are requested to submit their replies to the Green Paper by 31 July 2010 at the latest.