New EU forest strategy: for forests and the forest-based sector

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PURPOSE: to present a new EU Strategy for forests and the forest-based sector.

BACKGROUND: covering **over 40% of the EU's land area**, forests are an essential resource for improving the quality of life and creating employment, particularly in rural areas, whilst protecting ecosystems and ensuring ecological gains for all.

While the Treaty on the Functioning the EU makes no reference to specific provisions for an EU forest policy, the EU has a long history of contributing through its policies to implementing sustainable forest management and to Member States' decisions on forests.

The current Strategy dates from 1998. Based on cooperation between EU and Member States, (subsidiarity and shared responsibility), it established a framework for forest-related actions that support sustainable forest management. The Forest Action Plan 2007-2011 was an important instrument for implementing the strategy.

Over the last 15 years, **significant societal and political changes** have influenced the way EU society looks at forests and forestry. The overall situation is characterised by growing demands on and threats to forests.

A new framework is needed to:

- ensure that the **multifunctional potential** of EU forests is managed in a sustainable and balanced way, enabling our forests' vital ecosystem services to function correctly ;
- satisfy the **growing demand** for raw material for existing and new products (e.g. green chemicals or textile fibres) and for renewable energy ;
- respond to the challenges and opportunities that **forest-based industries** face ;
- **protect forests and biodiversity** from the significant effects of storms and fires, increasingly scarce water resources, and pests.

CONTENT: the Commission presents a strategy aiming to **put forests and the forest sector at the heart of the path towards a green economy** and to value the benefits that forests can sustainably deliver, while ensuring their protection.

The new strategy has been formulated by the Commission with close cooperation with Member States. It revolves around **eight areas for action** :

- support **rural development**, particularly through the use of rural development funds to ensure the sustainable management of forests ;
- foster the competitiveness and sustainability of the EU's **forest-based industries**, **bio-energy** and the wider green economy ;

- maintain and enhance the resilience of forests regarding **climate change**, including through fire prevention and other adaptive solutions (e.g. appropriate species, plant varieties, etc.) ;

- protect forests and enhance **ecosystem services**: the strategy supports the use of Forest Management Plans which are at the core of both the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and EU Rural Development funding;

- improve the **knowledge base** on forests to better understand the complex environmental and societal challenges facing the forest sector ;

- **stimulate innovation** across the forest sector through EU framework programmes for research and development ;

- work to **manage forests coherently** and better understand them through improving coordination with policies relating to forests, cooperation regarding forest governance and communication with respect to the public;

- ensure consistency between EU and Member State policies and commitments on forest-related issues at **international level.**

A review will be carried out by 2018 to assess progress in implementing the strategy.