

Forest policy: implementation of the European Union's forestry strategy

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PURPOSE: to present an implementation report of the EU Forestry Strategy

CONTENT: This Communication responds to the request of the European Council to the Commission to present an implementation report of the EU Forestry Strategy. In preparing this report, the Commission carried out extensive consultations with the Member States and stakeholders via the Standing Forestry Committee, the Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork, including an internet-based stakeholder consultation.

The Communication presents the main conclusions of the analysis as well as emerging issues affecting forests and forestry, and outlines possible actions for the future. The Commission Staff Working Document, which is attached to the Communication, provides a detailed description of the actions and activities implemented in the context of the EU Forestry Strategy in the period 1999–2004.

The Communication concludes that, overall, the basic principles and elements identified in 1998 in the EU Forestry Strategy are still valid. Sustainable Forestry Management (SFM) and the multifunctional role of forests remain the overarching common principles; national forest programmes provide a suitable framework for implementing these principles; and there is widespread recognition of the increasing need to take global and cross-sectoral issues into account in forest policy.

The experiences gained in the implementation period show that forests and forestry can contribute to the Lisbon objectives of sustainable economic growth and competitiveness, and to the Gothenburg objectives of safeguarding the quantity and the quality of the natural resource base. However, in order to maintain and maximise this contribution in the future, the Strategy and its implementation process need to be placed within the newly emerging policy context.

Firstly, even if the different measures implemented over the last years have led to progress in the sustainable management of forests, the competitiveness and economic viability of forest management in the EU – based on a multipurpose approach, simultaneously serving economic, social and environmental objectives – is increasingly being challenged in the context of an open and global market. Most forest owners have few possibilities to realise economies of scale. Forest owners provide a wide range of goods and services to society, although they largely rely on wood sales for revenue. To satisfy the growing public interest in the management of forests for their environmental and social benefits requires, in many cases, changes in management practices that may reduce the economic viability of forestry. If the tradition of multipurpose forestry in the EU is to be maintained, these issues need to be addressed in the future.

Secondly, while the EU Forestry Strategy is based on subsidiarity and shared responsibility, there are a number of EU policies and initiatives that affect forests and forestry. There is a need to strengthen coherence between EU policies, as well as co-ordination between the Commission and the Member States, and to establish adequate monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of the Strategy, so that the various functions of forests and their links with other policies are addressed in a coherent way in the policy formation process.

Thirdly, all stakeholders concerned with forests and forestry stress the importance of good governance for the protection and sustainable management of forests. A participatory and collaborative approach to policy formulation and implementation is a pre-condition for good governance. There is a need to review and

strengthen the consultation structures in forestry at Community and national level, in order to facilitate transparency in decision-making and a structured dialogue with all stakeholders.

Lastly, the global importance of forests for sustainable development, including their climate change and biodiversity dimensions, is being increasingly acknowledged. The EU should firmly continue to support the international commitments for the sustainable management of forests at global level. In this respect, the decision on the future international arrangement on forests, which will be taken at the 5th session of the UNFF in May 2005, will be significant.

In providing a reference framework for forest-related policies, initiatives and actions, the EU Forestry Strategy has changed the way forest-related issues are discussed today. However, the changes in the policy context suggest that a more coherent and pro-active approach to governing the Union's forest resources is needed in the future. Such an approach should be based on a shared vision of the EU's forest sector and the challenges it faces at global, Community and national levels, and on a shared understanding of what forests and forestry can contribute to modern society. It should encompass a set of clear objectives that can provide a basis for regular monitoring and stocktaking, and bring together the thematic, horizontal and cross-sectoral policy initiatives at Community and national level in a structured framework to encourage better and more effective co-ordination and consultation, and promote the flow of information among the various actors concerned.

The Commission believes that the development of an EU Action Plan for Sustainable Forest Management could provide such a framework. An Action Plan could provide the necessary impetus to transform the EU Forestry Strategy into a dynamic process capable of responding to the newly emerging policy context and delivering outcomes consistent with the Lisbon and the Gothenburg Strategies.

Therefore, after reviewing the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy, the Commission is proposing to the European Council that it will:

1. Develop an EU Action Plan for Sustainable Forest Management, which should provide a coherent framework for the implementation of forest-related actions and serve as an instrument of co-ordination between Community actions and the forest policies of the Member States. The list of actions to be taken at Community and national levels should cover, but not be limited to, the following elements and domains: socio-economic issues (competitiveness of forestry, valuation of social and environmental goods and services); environmental issues (climate change, forest fires, water, biodiversity conservation); use of wood as energy source; information about wood as a renewable and environmentally friendly resource; governance issues; horizontal activities (research, training, forest statistics, monitoring); and coordination, communication and co-operation. The international dimension of these issues should also be addressed.
2. Review the existing Community means and practices to facilitate co-ordination, communication and co-operation between different policy sectors, which have an influence on forestry, in the light of the increasing complexity of forest policy and of the decision-making processes. This review will also include Council Decision 89/367/EEC of 29 May 1989 setting up the Standing Forestry Committee, and the role this body should play in the implementation of the Action Plan.

The Commission proposes to present the Action Plan in 2006.