

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — Reporting on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy'

(COM(2005) 84 final)

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On 17 March 2005, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 7 October 2005. The rapporteur was Mr Kallio. The co-rapporteur was Mr Wilms.

At its 421st plenary session, held on 26 and 27 October 2005 (meeting of 26 October 2005), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 97 votes in favour with 1 abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1 The EC Treaty does not provide for a common forestry policy, nor does the proposal for a new constitutional Treaty.

1.2 The European Commission published a communication on a forestry strategy for the EU on 18 November 1998. On 15 December 1998 the EU Council of Ministers adopted a resolution on the Union's forestry strategy based on the Commission communication.

1.3 The Council identified sustainable management and use of forests — as defined by the ministerial conference on forestry held in Helsinki in 1993 — and the multifunctional role of forests as key elements of the common forestry strategy, serving as a general basis for action.

1.4 Other key principles of the forestry strategy are subsidiarity, according to which responsibility for forestry policy lies with the Member States, and the possibility for the Community to contribute to the achievement of sustainable management and use of forests and the multifunctional role of forests, wherever Community-level action can bring added value.

1.5 The European Economic and Social Committee issued an own-initiative additional opinion on EU forestry policy on 9 December 1999.

1.6 In its resolution, the Council called upon the Commission to report to it within five years on the implementation of the EU forestry strategy.

1.7 The Commission issued its communication on implementation of the EU forestry strategy on 10 March 2005. A Staff Working Document is attached to the communication which contains a detailed description of the actions and activities implemented in the context of the EU Forestry Strategy during the period 1999–2004.

1.8 The Committee endorses the general thrust of the Commission communication, especially with regard to enhancing implementation and improving coordination. The Committee believes it is important to implement the Commission's proposed action plan for sustainable forest management without delay.

2. Implementing the EU forestry strategy

2.1 Changes in the operating environment

2.1.1 Challenges facing the EU forestry sector and forestry policy have been affected since 1998 by many changes in the policy context; the Commission communication highlights EU enlargement, adoption of EU strategic policy objectives and developments in the international forestry and environment policy framework.

2.1.2 With enlargement, EU forest area increased by about 20 %, forest resources by about 30 % and the number of forest owners from 12 million to 16 million. It is necessary to increase institutional capacity for promoting sustainable forestry in the new Member States; developing private ownership structures and institutional structures present a particular challenge.

2.1.3 At the sustainable development summit in Johannesburg in 2002 the importance of sustainable forestry was highlighted as a sustainable development resource and a way of helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals more generally. The summit approved an action plan which is binding on governments and which included a number of decisions relating to forests.

2.1.4 The EU forestry sector has had to face an increasingly globalised market for forest products and a highly concentrated forestry industry requiring more efficient timber production than before.

2.1.5 Forests have a significant role and provide many benefits for society. At the same time, sustainable use of forests and the environmental services provided by them have become more and more important. In particular the international environment agreements signed by the EU and its Member States have created new challenges for forestry.

2.1.6 The Lisbon European Council (March 2000) approved a new strategic goal for the EU, namely to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. The Gothenburg European Council (June 2001) approved the EU sustainable development strategy, complementing the Lisbon strategy, which requires dealing with economic, social and environmental policies in a mutually reinforcing way.

2.1.7 Many EU policies, laws and measures have a direct or indirect impact on forestry. Their compatibility and complementarity with EU forestry strategy and its implementation have not been evaluated.

2.2 *The European Union and international forestry policy*

2.2.1 In its resolution, the Council noted in relation to the forestry strategy that the Community should be actively involved in implementing the resolutions of the ministerial conference on forestry and participate pro-actively in international discussion and negotiations on forestry-related issues, in particular the United Nations Intergovernmental Forum on Forests.

2.2.2 In its 1999 opinion, the European Economic and Social Committee noted that the EU should provide strong support for the establishment of a global, legally binding instrument for the management, conservation and sustainable development of every kind of forest, which complies with the forestry principles agreed at Rio. This objective is still relevant from the point of view of the internationalisation of trade in forest products, the globalisation of the forestry industry, the continuing loss of forests and the need to protect the rights of local populations that depend on forests.

2.2.3 To prevent illegal logging and selling of timber, the Commission has adopted the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan and a legislative proposal on setting up the FLEGT authorisation system. The Committee considers the prevention of illegal logging and illegal selling of timber to be of utmost importance. Illegal logging causes serious environmental, economic and social damage, and timber from illegal logging distorts trade in timber products. However, as far as preventing illegal logging is concerned, the emphasis should primarily be on measures that can be taken in collaboration with timber-producing countries to tighten up administrative processes and improve law enforcement. This is the best way of taking into account national social factors and influences on the living conditions and welfare of communities dependent on forests, for example. Particular attention should

be paid to protecting original natural forests and their diversity. Clarification of land-use rights is an essential part of efforts to reduce illegal logging. The proposed authorisation scheme does not obviate the need to tighten up these measures.

2.2.4 The impact of international economic, social and environment policy and UN environmental agreements on EU forests and the framework for forestry activities has increased. Under the UN Convention on Biodiversity, an extended work programme on forest biodiversity was adopted in 2002. Under the UN Convention on Climate Change there was agreement on the role of forests as carbon sinks in preventing climate change. The Kyoto Protocol in particular has presented the forestry sector with both new challenges and opportunities. Sustainable forestry can significantly affect the fulfilment of obligations imposed by international environmental agreements. This requires that the EU adopt a coordinated and convergent approach in international environment, economic and social policy and its own policies, one that strikes a balance between the various dimensions of sustainable forestry and respects the diverse uses of forests.

2.2.5 At pan-European level, the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) is the most important forum for discussing forestry policy, and has been able to create an effective framework for promoting forest management and use which are sustainable in economic, ecological, social and cultural terms.

2.3 *EU forestry strategy and Member States' national forestry policies*

2.3.1 The 4th Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (held in Vienna on 28-30 April 2003) emphasised the importance of national forestry programmes in developing cooperation between the forestry sector and other sectors. It was agreed at the ministerial conference that a national forestry programme constitutes a participatory, holistic, intersectoral and iterative process of policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at the national and/or subnational level in order to proceed towards the further improvement of sustainable forest management as defined in Helsinki, and to contribute to sustainable development.

2.3.2 In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, national forest programmes are a key means of implementing objectives of the EU forestry strategy. National forest programmes are holistic and multi-sectoral framework programmes that consider the impact of the forest sector on other sectors and the impact of other sectors on the forest sector. National forest programmes can take into account and balance multiple uses of forests and society's expectations of them taking into consideration special national features. National forest programmes create coherence and consistency between national policies and with international commitments. These programmes should be evaluated to monitor whether they fulfil the set objectives.

2.3.3 International environment and forestry policy commitments entered into by the EU and the Member States can best be implemented in the forestry sector by incorporating these commitments into national forest programmes.

2.3.4 The EU should promote the drawing up of national forest programmes, as recommended by the MCPFE, in order to promote sustainable forestry and achieve a holistic approach to developing forestry and forestry policy in the Member States and the Community.

2.4 Rural development policy and forestry

2.4.1 The principal instrument for implementing forestry strategy at Community level has been rural development policy. During the period 2000-2006, EUR 4.8 billion was allocated to forestry measures under rural development policy, half of which was spent on afforestation of agricultural land and half on other forestry measures.

2.4.2 The Court of Auditors' Special Report No 9/2004 on Forestry Measures within Rural Development Policy found that neither the Commission nor the Member States assumed responsibility for assessing whether a project contributed to the achievement of the EU forestry strategy.

2.4.3 The General Regulation on support for rural development (No 1257/1999, Article 29) stipulates that support for forestry provided by the Member States under rural development policy must be based on national or subnational forestry programmes or equivalent instruments. In some Member States national programmes are only just being set up, and they are operational in only a few countries.

2.4.4 The assessment of forestry measures carried out under rural development policy has been hampered by the Commission's lack of data on Member States' forestry measures. No effective system exists for monitoring forestry measures in the Member States supported by EU funding.

2.4.5 Although a significant portion of funding is used for afforestation measures, no clear operational objectives have been set regarding how afforestation measures should be deployed under the forestry strategy, in particular taking environmental objectives into account.

2.4.6 Many Commission DGs and units are involved in the procedure for approving rural development plans and operational programmes, as well as the approval of forestry measures. The complexity of decision-making has limited the extent to which rural development policy is used in implementing the EU forestry strategy.

2.4.7 It must also be clarified whether it would be more efficient to concentrate EU resources not on subsidising afforestation

but on timber market promotion, on reward mechanisms for environmental services, on research, training and information, and on rural development measures to secure long-term improvements in conditions and employment in the forestry sector and in environmental services provided by forests.

2.4.8 It must also be remembered that forestry and timber is a market-based industry and part of the open sector of the economy. The EU internal market will only function efficiently if competition on the timber market is not distorted by support policy.

2.5 Protection of forests and safeguarding the environmental services provided by forests

2.5.1 The practice of forestry should be economically, ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable. Protection of forests, monitoring their condition, repairing damage and safeguarding the environmental services they provide are important aspects of sustainable forestry. Sustainable forest use should be safeguarded by ensuring adequate regeneration.

2.5.2 Key objectives for EU forests are to maintain their health and vitality by protecting them from air pollutants, forest fires and other harmful agents, whether organic (diseases, insects) or inorganic (erosion).

2.5.3 Some 0.4 million hectares of forest in the EU are hit by fire every year. Forest fires are a serious problem especially in the southern Member States. As well as preventing forest fires, the Community has collected data on fires and monitored their size and causes. The Community has established a framework for systematic collection of data on the extent of and reasons for forest fires. This system has been used to assess and monitor measures taken by the Member States and the Commission to prevent forest fires. EU forest and environmental protection cannot succeed unless an effective approach is developed for monitoring and preventing forest fires.

2.5.4 The main laws concerned with maintaining the health and vitality of forests are the plant protection directive, the directive on marketing of forest reproductive material, and the framework regulation on monitoring of forests and environmental interactions (Forest Focus).

2.5.5 The Forest Focus regulation establishes a framework for a Community scheme to continue monitoring forest health and programmes for prevention of forest fires and to develop and diversify monitoring systems. The aim is to produce reliable and comparable data on the condition of forests and on the harmful factors affecting the Community's forest ecosystems.

2.5.6 Data are already being collected in the framework of international agreements, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the Timber Committee of the Economic Commission for Europe, EUROSTAT and the MCPFE on forest biodiversity, forest resources, carbon sequestration, the carbon cycle and forest products and protective effects. When developing Community monitoring schemes it is important to draw on national, pan-European and global monitoring schemes that already exist or are in preparation, and to ensure protection of landowners' privacy with respect to data handling and publishing.

2.5.7 The Community's plant protection directive contains provisions on protecting plants or products of plant origin from harmful substances, and on pest control. The plant protection directive also sets standards for international trade in wood products and planting material. Climate change increases the risk of plant pests spreading and breeding. To protect forest health and prevent the spread of major forest pests in EU territory it is necessary to ensure sufficiently tight plant protection rules and effective surveillance. Nevertheless, such measures should not lead to trade distorting measures, resulting from the use of such a directive as a non-tariff barrier to trade.

2.5.8 Forests and forest biodiversity are an important part of Europe's natural environment. Protecting forest biodiversity is a key aspect of Community environmental policy. The forestry strategy states that the conservation of forest biodiversity can be achieved in the Union largely through appropriate forest management measures. Biodiversity can also be protected through sustainable forestry by establishing forest conservation areas. In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, Member States are responsible for incorporating biodiversity issues as appropriate into national forest programmes or corresponding instruments.

2.5.9 The most important laws dealing with protection of forest biodiversity are the 'Habitats Directive' (92/43/EEC) and the 'Birds Directive' (79/409/EEC). Conservation of protected species and habitats has been achieved at Community level by setting up a network of special conservation areas, the Natura 2000 network. In management and control of Natura 2000 areas, account must be taken of social, economic and information preconditions, financial consequences as well as specific local and regional features.

2.5.10 Incorporating protection of forest biodiversity into the practice of sustainable forest use across the entire forest area and the Natura 2000 network is a fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of biodiversity conservation goals, as well as fulfilling binding international obligations.

2.5.11 At Community level, conservation of forest biodiversity is also guided by the European Community biodiversity strategy (COM(1998) 42). The communication on a biodiversity strategy stresses the importance of taking into account in a

balanced way the need for ensuring the conservation and appropriate enhancement of biodiversity in forests, the need for maintenance of forest health and ecological balance, and the sustainable production of raw material for goods and services needed by the forest industries and society. It is also noted that actions to enhance and conserve forest biodiversity should be part of an EU forestry strategy.

2.5.12 Demand for the environmental services provided by forests, and society's expectations of them, have increased. Maintaining and developing the social and leisure-related tasks of forests is an important aspect of sustainable forestry. Cooperation with NGOs and consumer organisations should be stepped up so that forestry can deliver products, services and applications that meet citizens' needs. The general public and forest owners must be informed about the environmental impact of their activities and about available sustainable approaches. To be able to show the importance of services provided by forests for the economy and society as a whole, overall balance sheets of such services must be drawn up in all the Member States.

2.5.13 Management and use of forests in the EU countries has long been regulated by various forestry policy methods. It is essential to respect forest owners' right to determine the use of their forests and to use their forest resources in accordance with the law and with the principles of sustainable forest use. Where producing social and environmental benefits goes beyond the legal requirements of forest management and adversely affects the economic viability of the forestry sector and the right of forest owners to decide on matters relating to their forest property, appropriate compensation or reward mechanisms must be put in place.

2.5.14 Environmental services and other benefits obtained from forests are the forest owner's products and should also be appreciated as such. It must be possible to put a value on environmental services provided by forests, and operational models should be developed to encourage their production on a voluntary and market-oriented basis.

2.6 *Forests and climate change*

2.6.1 Forests (including forest soil) are important carbon dioxide sinks and carbon reservoirs. By storing carbon, forests slow the greenhouse effect and global warming. Keeping forests productive and ensuring their renewal can safeguard their important role as carbon sinks.

2.6.2 Wood products can be used to replace products that are more harmful in terms of climate change. Promoting the use of wood can help to increase the amount of carbon stored in products. Increasing the use of energy from wood can help to offset the use of fossil fuels and reduce the atmospheric damage they cause.

2.6.3 Climate change also affects ecosystems and the basic conditions for practising forestry. A well-managed forest establishes the basis for adjusting to climate change. Given the long time-frame which forestry requires, adjustment to climate change must begin in good time. Forestry can also take advantage of climate change and create positive knock-on effects for society and for climate change prevention. Owing to the great variation in forest ecosystems and forestry activities across the EU, it makes most sense for adjustment to be managed at national level. At Community level support can be provided for research on climate change adjustment, and on developing information systems.

2.7 *Competitiveness of the EU forestry sector and promoting employment in forestry*

2.7.1 The forest sector is one of the EU's most important economic sectors. The forest sector, and forestry in particular, is labour-intensive and so a major source of employment. Small and medium-sized forestry companies are particularly important for the vitality of rural areas and their employment level. Forestry and forest based industries employ about 3.4 million people in the EU and the annual production value is about EUR 356 billion.

2.7.2 The employment effect of forestry is not limited to the wood-processing sector, but extends also to non-wood forest products and other biological products from forests. Non-wood forest products, such as cork, mushrooms and berries, as well as green tourism and hunting-related activities, are significant sources of income. New jobs and sources of income can also be created by developing the environmental and recreational services provided by forests.

2.7.3 In implementing the forestry strategy it has been possible to effectively promote environment-related issues. The development of environmental measures has also been underpinned by the EU's strong environmental policy. In accordance with the EU sustainable development strategy approved by the Gothenburg European Council and the Lisbon strategy, the EU forestry sector and forest-based industry should be developed in such a way as to play a full role in realising the objectives set for competitiveness, economic growth, employment and social cohesion.

2.7.4 Although the balance between different uses can vary widely according to the country or region, timber production continues to be the most important forestry activity, though only about 60 % of annual forest growth is harvested. Exploitation of wood resources in the EU can be increased without putting the sustainability of timber production and other uses of forests at risk. More efficient use of the EU's forest resources would make it possible to increase jobs in the sector and the capacity of the forestry industry and the EU's self-sufficiency in forestry products.

2.7.5 The competitiveness of the EU forestry industry has been addressed in a specific communication and in the evaluation of that communication. However, it is important that forestry and forest-based industries coordinate their activities in the forestry sector.

2.7.6 The EU needs an attractive timber-processing industry. This requires cooperation between the forestry sector and local communities to enhance skill levels in the sector. Safeguarding the sustainability and supply of the raw material base produced by forests is an essential requirement for production in the forestry industry.

2.7.7 Sustainable forest management is to serve as the basis for a competitive European forestry industry, so ways have to be found of making it an economically viable.

2.7.8 The efficiency, profitability and competitiveness of EU forestry and timber production should also be considered separately from the forestry industry's competitiveness. The forestry strategy does not adequately highlight the economic importance of forests and, for example, the functioning of the timber market. Maintaining and increasing competitiveness means enhancing the cost-effectiveness of forestry, creating favourable operating conditions for efficient exploitation of commercial forest stands and developing timber production methods. Profitable timber production makes it possible to invest in safeguarding and developing the ecological and economic sustainability of forests. However this must not adversely affect environmentally and socially sustainable forest use. There is, therefore, a considerable need for research in this field in order to gain some degree of clarity about the impact of increasingly mechanised forest management on environmental and social factors and to avoid any negative effects.

2.7.9 Maximising the multifunctional use of forests generates added value and increases sustainability for both the private sector economy and the economy as a whole. Resources, especially for research and development activities, should be concentrated on developing new uses for forests and their raw material resources and on establishing efficient markets for their products and services.

2.8 *Promoting the use of wood*

2.8.1 Wood is a renewable, recyclable raw material whose products store significant quantities of carbon and thus slow global warming. Forest energy can be used to replace more environmentally damaging energy production based on non-renewable energy sources.

2.8.2 To promote the use of timber, a long-term strategy should be created, focusing among other things on obstacles to timber use in legislation and standards, research and development activities, innovative timber uses, improving skills, and communication and information.

2.8.3 Wood-based energy should be promoted as part of an EU strategy to encourage innovative energy forms and the Biomass Action Plan. The wood-based energy market must be developed on the basis of demand. Promotion of wood-based energy use should take into account the raw materials needs of the timber-processing industry.

2.8.4 It is also important to recognise that sustainable use of renewable natural resources is crucial to competitiveness and economic sustainability when defining the role of forestry and conditions under which it operates. The EU sustainable development strategy and EU environmental policy, in particular the strategy on sustainable use of natural resources, must take into account the special role of renewable natural resources in building a more sustainable society.

2.9 *Developing capacity and skills in the forestry sector*

2.9.1 Forest ownership in Europe has a broad base. The state, publicly-owned companies and large enterprises own substantial areas of forest, while private family holdings are small in size. State forestry can play an important role in both timber production and especially in the production of social and environmental services.

2.9.2 It is important to develop the skills of all the different forestry sector stakeholders (e.g. employees, industry, forest owners, advisory and service organisations, public forestry authorities) and their ability to meet future challenges. One aspect of this effort is improving the conditions and capacity of stakeholders' own organisations and developing practical measures. Cooperation must be stepped up between the forestry sector and civil society to develop sustainable forestry.

2.9.3 Some 60 % of forest in the EU is privately owned, and there about 16 million private owners. A level playing-field must be ensured for family holdings with respect to sustainable forestry, timber production and market access. Forest owners' associations have also proven to be an effective means of providing information on sustainable forestry and the basis for practising it. The development of forest owners' associations has also made it possible to combat the fragmentation of forest ownership.

2.10 *Forest certification*

2.10.1 Forest certification is a voluntary market-based procedure for promoting sustainable forestry and informing customers and other stakeholder groups of its commitment to sustainable forestry. Forest certification can be used to underpin other activities to promote sustainable forestry. Forest certification schemes must respect the voluntary principle and the principles of credibility, openness, cost-effectiveness and non-discrimination, and the possibility for the various parties concerned to participate.

2.10.2 It is important that forest certification should remain a voluntary instrument. Rules should not be introduced at EU level that would effectively abolish the voluntary nature of certification and impose on forest owners and others involved in forestry mandatory forest management requirements that are higher level than prevailing legislation.

2.10.3 Since forest certification is a market-oriented instrument, the role of EU or national governments is limited to supporting initiatives of the private sector and NGOs to promote forest certification. However, governments cannot play a leading role in the forest certification process.

2.10.4 The EU must ensure that the internal market operates without constraints. From the perspective of the forestry sector it is important that government does not support one particular forest certification scheme through its actions. The market must offer alternatives and there must be free competition. The task of government is to ensure that no artificial obstacles to trade arise.

2.11 *The EU and forestry research*

2.11.1 The forestry sector can only meet these challenges, e.g. in relation to competitiveness and sustainable development, by developing new and innovative procedures, production methods and products. The role of forestry-related research and development activities in current and future EU research framework programmes must be stepped up.

2.11.2 The EU's 7th Research Framework Programme covers the period 2007-2013. European Technology Platforms are a new instrument for preparing and implementing the framework programme. The European paper industry (CEPI), woodworking industries (Cei-Bois) and family forest owners (CEPF) have presented a joint forestry-sector technology platform initiative to the Commission ('Innovative and Sustainable Use of Forest Resources').

2.11.3 It is essential to increase the share of research projects conducted into the impact of climate change, the state of forest health and appropriate monitoring systems. The EU should, through research and subsequent information exchange, boost forest owners' knowledge and encourage them to adapt their forests to climate change.

2.12 *Coordination of forest issues*

2.12.1 A prerequisite for managing forestry issues and implementing forestry measures is effective coordination between those policy areas that impact on forests and forestry. The aim should be for the Community to take more account than it currently does of the effects on forestry of its decision-making in different policy areas.

2.12.2 The European Economic and Social Committee commends the work of the Commission's InterService Group on Forestry in improving coordination on issues relating to forests and forestry. However, improving coordination and clarifying remits requires a single body which would be responsible for coordinating implementation, exchange of information and interaction between the various DGs, as well as communicating with and informing the forestry authorities of the Member States and relevant stakeholder groups. It is important to ensure that coordination takes place at a sufficiently high level. It is necessary to ensure that sufficient staff and other resources are available for Community measures to support sustainable development.

2.12.3 Both the Standing Forestry Committee and the Advisory Committee on Forestry and Cork must be provided with adequate resources to do their work. Scope for stakeholder groups to be involved in decision-making at the regular meetings of advisory committees must be strengthened. Forestry expertise in the Member States must be boosted in the other Council working groups, and especially the STAR Committee, when forestry-related issues are discussed. Coordination of the activities carried out by the committees and working groups dealing with forest-related issues should be effective, both with respect to intra-Community and international forestry issues. Meetings of advisory committees and working groups should be developed in such a way that the DGs dealing with issues that are relevant to forestry (agriculture, energy, environment, enterprise, research) hold discussions with key stakeholder groups (forest and land owners, the forestry industry, NGOs and other stakeholders).

2.12.4 When international obligations are implemented, it is important to clarify the division of powers between the Community and the Member States and to respect the subsidiarity principle. The Member States and the Commission coordinate their positions on international issues in the Council Working Group on Forestry. The position of this working group should be strengthened and it should be given a formal and coherent role.

3. Action plan to strengthen implementation of the forestry strategy

3.1.1 A more effective way is needed of developing sustainable forestry and harnessing the potential of forests to promote sustainable development. The Committee supports the Commission's proposed action plan, which would serve as a coordinating instrument and frame of reference for implementing measures in the forestry sector.

3.1.2 The EESC recommends that the Commission together with Member States should frame a clear vision and strategic goals for EU forests under the umbrella of the European forestry model. These should be based on, and in line with, the

forest-related decisions of the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, validated by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (WSSD). There it was confirmed that sustainable forest management is an aspect of sustainable development. Furthermore, Community actions related to forestry should enhance the contribution of forests to creating a sustainable society and to overall development goals, including the Lisbon strategy, the Gothenburg agreement and the Millennium Development Goals.

3.1.3 On the basis of the recommendations in this opinion, the vision called for should include at least the following issues. European forests and the forestry and timber industry will be a key factor contributing to a sustainable European society. A market-oriented, economically viable and competitive forestry, timber production and forest industry that strengthens regional economic networks provide jobs and livelihoods, and could have a particular impact on regional economy and development. Forests are an essential foundation of services of general interest and also play an important role with regard to recreational values culture and the environment. The European forest-based sector provides innovative know-how and high technology. The EU should contribute actively to international processes relating to forestry in line with WSSD and United Nations Forest Forum decisions.

3.1.4 The strategic goals for the action plan should be based on the principles of coordination and giving added value to existing forest policy. The forest-based sector should be recognised as an independent sector, and ex-ante evaluation of all upcoming related policies and measures should therefore be carried out.

3.1.5 The Action Plan for Sustainable Forest Management should cover all the dimensions of sustainable forestry and the entire forestry production chain. But in order to ensure efficient use of Community resources under the action plan it must be possible to specify to which activities and measures should primarily be allocated.

3.1.6 It is important that the action plan should provide for the forestry perspective to be taken into account when implementing other Community policies, e.g. environment, energy, rural development and industrial policy, so that forestry is promoted in a way that takes equal account of the economic, ecological, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability.

3.1.7 Information pooling on environmental services and assessment of them should be developed under the action plan. The plan should support the development of innovative and market-based operational models for producing forest environmental services. The possibilities of market-based payment systems should be explored to compensate the non-wood environmental services (e.g. protection of water resources, carbon sequestration) provided by forest owners.

3.1.8 Priority should be given to creating the optimum environment to ensure the competitiveness and economic viability of the forestry sector. The action plan should specify ways of supporting the development of innovative operational models that provided added value in forestry and of promoting business initiatives in the forestry sector. This should include provisions for setting up a virtual European timber exchange that would give an instant, global and transparent picture of economic trends (supply and demand) in respect of timber types and which forest owners could access at any time (on the internet).

3.1.9 A key element of the action plan must be to promote the use of wood and other forest products as renewable and environment-friendly materials. An information and communication programme on wood and other forest products must be drawn up and implemented under the action plan. The action plan must also take into account the use of wood as a renewable energy source.

3.1.10 In addition, the action plan must support the promotion of research and development on forests. One aspect of such activity would be incorporating major forestry research projects into the EU's 7th Research Framework Programme and supporting the forestry sector's Technology Platform initiative. Scientific studies (research contracts) conducted jointly with relevant European forestry university faculties should establish how many employees are required by the European forestry industry, and with what qualifications, in order for the sector to operate effectively on a sustainable and nature-friendly basis in accordance with laws, regulations and certification requirements. A study of forestry clusters should also be carried out.

3.1.11 The action plan should also try to establish how the EU's own efforts can support the European forestry ministers' conference process and implementation of the decisions made by it. In particular, the action plan should strengthen the implementation of national forest programmes in accordance with the general approach established at the European forestry ministers' conference.

3.1.12 The action plan should provide for exchange programmes of forestry employees between countries, so that they can learn about the strengths and weaknesses of national systems and so develop new approaches for their work at home.

3.1.13 One aspect of the action plan should be to identify practical ways of improving coordination and communication with respect to EU decision-making on forests. A European information and communication platform designed to make people feel closer to Europe should bring together the many different and interesting activities of Europe's forestry sector

and inform individual stakeholders in the forestry sector in the countries and regions about them directly.

3.1.14 Implementation of the action plan also requires assigning responsibility and allocating adequate resources.

3.1.15 An important element of the action plan must be measures to boost and maintain forest biodiversity. Moreover, biodiversity must be fostered in protected areas through special support schemes (such as the Natura 2000 premium) and by raising awareness and acceptance of the issue among the public, forest owners and the associations concerned. Also, in order to safeguard biodiversity in the remaining forest areas, ways and means must be developed to maintain and improve typical forest species diversity. The establishment of total protection areas must also be promoted. Given the specific obligations involved, state-owned forests are to be a focus of these activities, while appropriate reward schemes must be established for privately owned forests.

3.1.16 In order to be able to assess the effectiveness of the measures and tools adopted, it is vital to broaden the various monitoring systems in the action plan and make them part of an overall approach. It is necessary therefore, to map out, investigate and monitor forest biodiversity both inside and outside protected areas. Regular, large-scale studies into the state of forests are equally imperative. Research and monitoring must be used to check the extent to which forest measures can help maintain biodiversity.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that the forestry strategy and its implementation should continue to be based on the subsidiarity principle, and on the concept of economically, ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable forestry.

4.2 The EESC emphasises that in implementing the forestry strategy attention should be paid to aligning its objectives with the EU's Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies.

4.3 The EESC believes that the European Union should work consistently towards the achievement of a global, legally binding agreement on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all forest types, which complies with the forestry principles adopted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and underpins implementation of the proposals for measures adopted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests. The EESC also stresses that the European Union must take steps to ensure that existing processes and instruments designed to promote sustainable forestry are fully taken into account in international environmental agreements.

4.4 The EESC notes that ministerial conferences to discuss the protection of Europe's forests have an important role to play in cooperation on forests between European countries, and the decisions taken at such conferences should, where necessary, be incorporated into EU forestry strategy.

4.5 The EESC points to the positive impact of the forestry sector on employment and the vitality of rural areas and on the development of rural business activities. Forestry measures carried out in the context of rural development policy should be based on national forest programmes, and these should further the achievement of EU forestry strategy objectives. The EESC also calls for systems to be set up to monitor Member States' forestry measures introduced under the rural development directive and co-financed by the EU, and their impact. The EESC emphasises that support provided for forestry under rural development policy should not distort competition on the market for wood and other forest products.

4.6 The EESC stresses the beneficial effect that forests have on human health and the way they refresh the mind and help workers to relax. It therefore calls upon the Member States to respect the principle of the possibility of the public to have access to nature's resources, giving all people free access to woodlands while establishing the public's responsibility to observe the law, the access times for forests set by their owners and environmental protection rules.

4.7 In the EESC's view, balanced implementation of the forestry strategy requires that decisions taken in the sphere of European Union environmental policy and the objectives of EU forestry development should be consistent with and complement each other.

4.8 The EESC notes that protecting forests and safeguarding the environmental and social services they produce are an important aspect of sustainable forestry, and that in protecting forests and the production of environmental services resources should be devoted to developing operational models that encourage a voluntary and market-oriented approach. The production of social and environmental benefits which society needs must not unnecessarily constrain the property and decision-making rights of owners or threaten the profitability of forestry operating in accordance with legislation and the principles of sustainable forestry.

4.9 The EESC feels that it is important to recognise the importance of forests and the products obtained from them in controlling climate change and that the EU should promote research activity and exchange of information on adapting to climate change.

4.10 The EESC thinks that the European Commission should pay particular attention to issues that can strengthen the Community's efforts to create a favourable environment for sustainable forestry. The EESC believes that implementing the forestry strategy, as well as the Gothenburg and Lisbon strategies, in a balanced way requires more focus on promoting the commercial exploitation of forests and on profitability, competitiveness and employment in the forestry sector.

4.11 The EESC believes it is necessary to promote use of timber and other forest products as renewable and environment-friendly raw materials and energy sources, and that a long-term strategy should be drawn up to this end.

4.12 The EESC considers it important to promote the capacity of actors to develop sustainable forestry. The EESC considers it important that small forest owners should be given opportunities to develop their own forestry sustainably by strengthening organisations representing private forest owners. It is necessary to increase institutional capacity for promoting sustainable forestry in the new Member States; developing private ownership structures and institutional structures present a particular challenge.

4.13 The EESC points out that forest certification is an optional, market-based tool for promoting sustainable forestry. The EESC considers it important for the EU to take responsibility for the smooth functioning of the internal market and ensure that forest certification does not become an artificial obstacle to trade.

4.14 The EESC believes it is important to enhance the sustainability, capacity and competitiveness of the forestry sector through research and development.

4.15 The EESC believes it is essential to further tighten up coordination between the various main policy issues and that implications for the forestry sector are better reflected in decision-making on the various sectoral policies. To improve coordination a single body should be designated with responsibility for implementing the forestry strategy and for communicating with the various DGs, the Member States, forestry authorities and stakeholder groups.

4.16 The EESC supports the Commission's proposal to introduce a special action plan for implementing the forestry strategy. The EESC believes it is important that this action plan should include a definition of priorities and remits, and that sufficient resources should be provided for its implementation.

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The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND