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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION
TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

on an EU Forest Action Plan

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Communication responds to the request of the Council¹ to the Commission to present an EU Forest Action Plan in 2006. It has been prepared in close cooperation with the Member States and in consultation with stakeholders. It takes into account the report by the European Parliament on implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy and related reports by the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. The Commission Staff Working Document attached to the Communication provides a review of the preparatory process.

2. OVERALL PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

Overall principles

Building on the Council Resolution of 15 December 1998 on a forestry strategy for the European Union², the Action Plan provides a framework for forest-related actions at Community and Member State level and serves as an instrument of coordination between Community actions and the forest policies of the Member States.

The overall objective of the EU Forest Action Plan is to support and enhance sustainable forest management and the multifunctional role of forests. It is based on the following principles:

- national forest programmes as a suitable framework for implementing international forest-related commitments;
- the increasing importance of global and cross-sectoral issues in forest policy, calling for improved coherence and coordination;
- the need to enhance the competitiveness of the EU forest sector and good governance of EU forests;
- respect for the principle of subsidiarity.

Recognising the wide range of natural, social, economic and cultural conditions and differences in ownership regimes of EU forests, the Action Plan acknowledges the need for specific approaches and actions for different types of forests. It emphasises the important role played by forest owners in the sustainable management of forests in the EU.

¹ Council Conclusions on an EU Forest Action Plan, 2662nd meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, 30–31 May 2005.

² OJ C 56, 26.2.1999.

The Action Plan aims to contribute to achieving the objectives of the renewed Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs and of the Gothenburg Agenda for sustainable development. It will be followed by a complementary Communication on the competitiveness of the EU forest-based industries, currently under preparation.

Objectives

In the course of preparation of the EU Forest Action Plan, the Commission and the Member States have developed a common vision of forestry and of the contribution which forests and forestry make to modern society:

Forests for society: long-term multifunctional forestry fulfilling present and future societal needs and supporting forest-related livelihoods.

Multifunctional forestry delivers economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits. It supplies renewable and environmentally friendly raw materials and plays an important role in the economic development, employment and prosperity of Europe, in particular of rural areas. Forests make a positive contribution to the quality of life, providing a pleasant living environment, opportunities for recreation and preventive healthcare, while maintaining and enhancing environmental amenities and ecological values. Forests are to maintain the spiritual and cultural heritage they contain.

In accordance with the above vision, the Action Plan has four main objectives:

- improving long-term competitiveness;
- improving and protecting the environment;
- contributing to the quality of life;
- fostering coordination and communication.

The five-year Action Plan (2007–2011) consists of a set of key actions which the Commission proposes to implement jointly with the Member States. It also points out additional actions which can be carried out by the Member States according to their specific conditions and priorities, with support from existing Community instruments, although implementation may also require national instruments.

3. ACTIONS

3.1. Improving long-term competitiveness

Objective: To improve the long-term competitiveness of the forest sector and to enhance the sustainable use of forest products and services.

Competitiveness of the forest sector is a necessary basis for the multiple benefits that sustainable forestry provides to society. The forest sector has great potential to further develop high-quality and value-added products and services for the diverse and growing demands of society based on a renewable raw material source. Research and technological development, diversification, innovation and investment in job

quality and human capital are needed to develop a strong and dynamic sector capable of meeting the challenges of global change.

Key action 1: Examine the effects of globalisation on the economic viability and competitiveness of EU forestry

The **Commission** will carry out a study on the effects of globalisation on the competitiveness of EU forestry in order to identify the main factors influencing developments in the EU forest sector and to underpin discussions on further action to be taken to enhance the competitiveness and economic viability of forestry.

Key action 2: Encourage research and technological development to enhance the competitiveness of the forest sector

Research and technological development are crucial for the sustainable development of the EU forest sector.

The **Commission** will continue its support for forestry research and technological development in the 7th Research Framework Programme³.

The **Commission** and the **Member States** will continue to encourage the development of the Forest-based Sector Technology Platform. The Commission will monitor carefully the implementation of the strategic research agenda prepared by the platform. The Member States may also enjoy the opportunities offered by the ERDF⁴ in the field of research to carry out specific projects.

The Commission will explore the possibility of establishing a Community forest science forum in order to strengthen the science/policy interface. As a first step, in 2007 the Commission will organise a workshop to discuss Community actions in this area.

Key action 3: Exchange and assess experiences on the valuation and marketing of non-wood forest goods and services

Forests fulfil numerous functions which are not reflected in the prices of marketed wood and non-wood goods. There is a need to quantify the total value of forests and their functions, and to develop and apply instruments to compensate for non-marketed goods and services.

The **Commission** will propose to the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC) to form an ad hoc working group to take stock of experiences on mechanisms for valuation and compensation of non-marketed goods and services. The **Commission** will act as a facilitator for such an exchange. The **Member States** will actively participate in sharing experiences.

The **Member States** will promote studies and pilot projects on valuation, compensation and innovative marketing of forest goods and services, which may be supported by the EARDF⁵, the LIFE+ instrument⁶, the 7th Research Framework

³ COM(2005) 119 final.

⁴ European Regional Development Fund.

⁵ CR (EC) No 1290/2005 (OJ L 209, 11.8.2005).

⁶ COM(2004) 621 final.

Programme and the Intelligent Energy-Europe Programme (IEE) within the Innovation Framework Programme (CIP)⁷.

Key action 4: Promote the use of forest biomass for energy generation

Using wood as an energy source can help to mitigate climate change by substituting fossil fuel, improving energy self-sufficiency, enhancing security of supply and providing job opportunities in rural areas.

The **Standing Forestry Committee** will support the implementation of the Biomass Action Plan⁸, in particular concerning the development of markets for pellets and chips and information to forest owners about the opportunities of energy feedstock production.

The **Commission** will facilitate investigation and dissemination of experience on mobilisation of low-value timber, small-sized wood and wood residues for energy production. The **Member States** will assess the availability of wood and wood residues and the feasibility of using them for energy production at national and regional levels, in order to consider further actions in support of the use of wood for energy generation. The 7th Research Framework Programme and the IEE-CIP provide the necessary possibilities to facilitate such activities.

The **Commission** will continue to support research and development of technologies for the production of heat, cooling, electricity and fuels⁹ from forest resources in the energy theme of the 7th Research Framework Programme's cooperation specific programme, and to encourage the development of the biofuel technology platform and support the implementation of its research agenda through the 7th Research Framework Programme.

Key action 5: Foster the cooperation between forest owners and enhance education and training in forestry

Due to changing ownership structures and the increasing share of non-farmers owning forests, a growing number of owners lack skills and capacities for sustainable forest management. Fragmentation of private forest holdings may lead to further difficulties and higher costs in forest management, reducing mobilisation of wood and undermining the provision of forest services. A well-trained and adaptable workforce is also necessary.

In view of the foregoing, the **Member States** will support vocational training and education of forest owners and forest workers. The **Member States** will also support the development of advisory services for forest owners and their associations. These services will contribute to new market-oriented approaches, to disseminating information on sustainable management practices, and to forest-owners' skills in biodiversity enhancement and habitat restoration. The **Commission** and the **Member States** will exchange experiences and best practices on these issues and on how to increase the market supply of wood for industrial use. The EARDF, together with

⁷ COM(2005) 121 final.

⁸ COM(2005) 628 final.

⁹ COM(2006) 34 final.

Community instruments for education and training, provide opportunities to support these activities.

In order to strengthen the competitiveness and economic viability of forestry, and in the framework of their priorities, the **Member States** may also:

- encourage cooperation between forest owners, industry and third parties in the development of new products, processes, technologies and efficient markets;
- encourage investments to enhance the economic value of forests;
- support establishment and development of forest-owner associations.

3.2. Improving and protecting the environment

Objective: To maintain and appropriately enhance biodiversity, carbon sequestration, integrity, health and resilience of forest ecosystems at multiple geographical scales.

Maintaining productive capacity, resilience and biological diversity are key factors in ensuring a healthy forest ecosystem. This, in turn, is essential for a healthy society and economy.

Forests play an essential role in the realisation of the Community's Gothenburg objectives on sustainable development and the targets set in the 6th Community Environment Action Programme, including relevant Thematic Strategies.

Key action 6: Facilitate EU compliance with the obligations on climate change mitigation of the UNFCCC¹⁰ and its Kyoto Protocol and encourage adaptation to the effects of climate change

Forests act as carbon sinks and can produce renewable and environmentally friendly raw materials and energy feedstock. However, about 25% of global greenhouse gas emissions can be attributed to land use changes, among which tropical deforestation is the most prominent¹¹.

The **Commission** will examine with the SFC how to respond in a more co-ordinated way to the obligations of Articles 3.3 and 3.4¹² of the Kyoto Protocol, including, inter alia, reporting on land use changes and forest management.

The **Commission** will facilitate exchanges between the SFC and the EU sinks experts group¹³, in order to increase the effectiveness of the discussions on climate change mitigation. Measures to reduce global deforestation and post-2012 climate commitments will be addressed.

The **Commission** will continue to support research, training and studies on the impact of and adaptation to climate change.

¹⁰ UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

¹¹ COM(2005) 35 final.

¹² Afforestation, reforestation, deforestation and forest management.

¹³ This group covers the discussions on land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) at the meetings of the UNFCCC.

The **Member States** are invited to work on assessing the impacts of climate change, to raise awareness and to exchange experience, as well as to promote activities for mitigation and adaptation.

Key action 7: Contribute towards achieving the revised Community biodiversity objectives for 2010 and beyond¹⁴

As much of the EU biodiversity is impoverished and still declining, accelerated action at Community and Member State level is required to restore habitats and natural ecosystems, if the objective to halt biodiversity loss is to be met.

The Commission will propose to the Standing Forestry Committee to:

- exchange experiences on implementation of Natura 2000 in forest areas;
- consider forest biodiversity monitoring as a pilot exercise in the framework of the current work on EU biodiversity indicators¹⁵;
- consider monitoring of the fragmentation of forests and of the effects of forest expansion on biodiversity;
- evaluate existing information and scientific studies on the necessary area coverage of and modalities for protection of forests undisturbed by man;
- follow the implementation of CBD¹⁶ and other decisions regarding forest biodiversity.

The **Commission** will periodically organise joint meetings of the EU Forest and Nature Directors and promote active participation by forest administrations in informal exchanges between Member States on implementation of nature protection legislation in the EU (“GreenEnforce Network”).

Key action 8: Work towards a European Forest Monitoring System

The Forest Focus¹⁷ monitoring scheme expires in 2006. Over the period 2007–2013, it will be possible to support EU-level environmental monitoring under the new LIFE+ instrument.

Harmonised information on forest is needed to fulfil the Commission's and the Member States' commitments under international agreements and to implement EU Directives, such as Natura 2000, the Water Framework Directive and the Plant Health Directive.

The **Commission**, together with the **Member States** and relevant international organisations, will work towards establishing a European Forest Monitoring System that draws on existing forest databases and monitoring systems. A coherent system

¹⁴ COM(2006) 216 final "Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 and beyond".

¹⁵ “SEBI 2010” (“Streamlining European 2010 Biodiversity Indicators” process with the European Environment Agency and UN Environment Programme).

¹⁶ UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

¹⁷ Regulation (EC) No 2152/2003 (OJ L 324, 11.12.2003).

based on existing and soon available¹⁸ data collection schemes and on the expertise of the Member States, the Commission (Joint Research Centre, Eurostat¹⁹), the EEA²⁰, and international organisations (e.g. UNECE²¹, FAO²²) is the best way to meet the reporting needs for both scientific and policy purposes. A European Forest Data Centre will be established by the Joint Research Centre. Forest monitoring will not be limited to environmental indicators but will also include economic and social information and could be expanded to cover the indicators endorsed at the 4th Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE)²³.

Key action 9: Enhance the protection of EU forests

Forest fires, biotic agents and atmospheric pollution have a sizeable influence on the ecological condition and productive capacity of forests in the EU. Global trade and climate change have increased the potential vectors for harmful organisms and invasive species. As protection of forests against biotic and abiotic agents is one of the main priorities of forest policy, it is essential to have up-to-date information about the state of forests in the EU.

The **Commission** will:

- work towards the further development of the European Forest Fire Information System;
- carry out a study which will analyse the main factors influencing the evolution of forest condition in Europe (including forest fires), the efficiency of current Community instruments and measures for forest protection, and potential future options to improve the efficiency of the measures;
- encourage Member States to form groupings to study particular regional problems with the condition of forests;
- support research on protection of forests and phytosanitary issues under the 7th Research Framework Programme.

In addition, with support from the EARDF and the Life+ instrument, the **Member States** may:

- develop national afforestation guidelines and promote afforestation for environmental and protective objectives;
- promote agroforestry systems;
- promote Natura 2000-forest measures;
- promote schemes for forest owners to engage in voluntary environmental commitments;

¹⁸ The EU is pursuing two initiatives to provide advanced, timely and coherent geospatial information until 2008: the navigation system "Galileo" and the Earth observation system "GMES" (Global Monitoring for Environment and Security).

¹⁹ Statistical Office of the European Community.

²⁰ European Environment Agency.

²¹ UN Economic Commission for Europe.

²² UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

²³ 4th MCPFE (Vienna 2003): Indicators for sustainable forest management.

- promote investments which enhance the ecological value of forests;
- support forest fire prevention measures;
- support restoration of forests damaged by natural disasters and fire;
- support studies on the causes of forest fires, awareness raising campaigns, training and demonstration projects;
- review and update broader protection strategies against biotic and abiotic agents, including studies on risk assessment in relation to harmful organisms and invasive species.

3.3. *Contributing to the quality of life*

Objective: to contribute to the quality of life by preserving and improving the social and cultural dimensions of forests.

Forests provide goods and services that benefit citizens, their health and their quality of life, including amenities and recreation in urban and rural areas, occupation and income for millions of people, protection of soil and water and protection against erosion, desertification and natural hazards.

To contribute to quality of life by preserving and improving the social and cultural dimensions of forests, **Member States** have the possibility, within the framework of their priorities and with support from the EARDF, to encourage investment to enhance the public amenity value of forests.

Key action 10: Encourage environmental education and information

Awareness raising is necessary to ensure that the benefits of sustainable forest management are adequately acknowledged by society.

The **Commission** will facilitate exchanges of experience between Member States on environmental education and information campaigns, particularly on those directed at children (initiatives such as “schools in the forest” or “forest education centres”). The **Member States** will promote education on sustainable forest management.

Key action 11: Maintain and enhance the protective functions of forests

The increasing threat of natural disasters, extreme weather events as well as erosion and desertification problems in parts of Europe highlight the importance of the protective function of forests, particularly in mountain and Mediterranean areas.

Coordinated monitoring and planning along with efficient protective measures are needed. Awareness raising and knowledge transfer on natural hazard and risk management are of great importance.

Within the framework of their priorities, and with support from the EARDF, the **Member States** may:

- enhance investments and sustainable forest management for natural hazard prevention and safety;

- include these aspects in forest education and awareness-raising activities.

With support from the ERDF, the Member States may enhance investments for natural hazard prevention and safety, notably in the framework of cross-border cooperation.

The **Commission** will facilitate exchanges of experience on measures taken to enhance the protective function of forests.

Key action 12: Explore the potential of urban and peri-urban forests

For many Europeans urban forests are the main contact with nature's benefits and values. Planning, creating and managing urban and peri-urban forests impose new demands on forest managers, particularly on the engagement and response of local communities who may be affected by or expecting to benefit from forest operations.

Building on scientific work, the **Commission** and the **Member States** will:

- review and integrate methodologies for evaluating the social and human impacts of urban and peri-urban forests in order to establish appropriate long-term indicators and robust frameworks to guide future investment and management;
- explore structures to engage local communities and non-traditional stakeholders in planning, creating, managing and using urban and peri-urban forests.

3.4. *Fostering coordination and communication*

Objective: To improve coherence and cross-sectoral cooperation in order to balance economic, environmental and socio-cultural objectives at multiple organisational and institutional levels.

While forest policy is a competence of the Member States, many policy initiatives with an impact on the forest sector are developed at European level. Coordination between different policy areas in the Member States, between the Member States and the Commission, and within the Commission is particularly important for the forest sector.

Key action 13: Strengthen the role of the Standing Forestry Committee

The Council Decision setting up the Standing Forestry Committee²⁴ provides the Committee with a broad mandate on aspects related to exchanges of information and consultation.

To allow co-ordinated implementation of the Action Plan the **Commission**, together with the **members of the SFC**, will establish a yearly work programme for the Committee.

²⁴ Decision 89/367/EC (OJ L 165, 15.6.1989, p. 14).

The **Commission** will organise joint meetings between the members of the SFC and the Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork²⁵, as well as with other consultative bodies like the Advisory Committee on Community Policy regarding Forestry and Forest-based Industries²⁶.

The **Commission** will seek to strengthen the active involvement of the SFC in its advisory role in policy formulation processes, in particular by encouraging the SFC to provide position papers and own-initiative reports.

The working methods of the SFC will be adjusted by making use of ad hoc working groups.

Member States are encouraged to continue regularly organising meetings of the EU Forest Directors.

Key action 14: Strengthen coordination between policy areas in forest-related matters

In order to enhance efficient exchange of information on initiatives that may have impacts on the forest sector, each relevant Directorate-General will appoint a co-ordinator for forest-related policies. The **Commission** will regularly inform the SFC of initiatives and actions in different policy areas that are of relevance to the work of the committee. While respecting the Commission's administrative structures and the specific responsibilities of individual services, the **Commission** will further strengthen the role of the Inter-Service Group on Forestry.

Key action 15: Apply the open method of coordination (OMC) to national forest programmes

The Lisbon European Council defined the OMC as a method to help Member States to progressively develop their own policies.

The applicability of the OMC to voluntary coordination of national forest programmes will be explored by the **Member States** and the **Commission** in the context of the **SFC**.

Key action 16: Strengthen the EU profile in international forest-related processes

A high degree of coordination is necessary both within the **Commission** and in the **Member States** to ensure coherence in different forest-related international processes. Relevant Council Working Parties, especially that on Forestry, have a key role to play in this regard.

The main tool by which international commitments can be supported in non-EU countries is the economic and development cooperation, which is a shared competence of the **Community** and **Member States**. Overall aid levels are set to increase over the next decade. The challenge is to ensure that adequate account is taken of the role of forests when decisions are taken on resource allocation.

²⁵ Decision 2004/391/EC (OJ L 20, 24.4.2004, p. 50).

²⁶ Decision 97/837/EC (OJ L 346, 17.12.1997, p. 95).

Although the **Commission** will no longer have a specific financing instrument for forests after 2006, there will be opportunities for financial support from 2007 on from the Environment and Natural Resources Thematic Programme, as well as in country or regional programmes. This will allow support for implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements²⁷ and forest policy processes²⁸ to continue. The FLEGT Action Plan²⁹ will be another priority objective for support from the **Commission** and **Member States**, in particular for capacity building in FLEGT partner countries.

Concerning cooperation with acceding and candidate countries, and also with neighbouring European countries, the **Commission** will remain active in the Ministerial Conferences on the Protection of Forests in Europe, the UNECE Timber Committee and the FAO's forest-related activities.

Key action 17: Encourage the use of wood and other forest products from sustainably managed forests

Appropriate actions to encourage the enhanced use of wood and other forest products will be included in the foreseen Communication concerning the competitiveness of the forest-based industries. This Communication is a follow-up to the Communication on the State of Competitiveness of the EU Forest-based and Related Industries³⁰, which included a thorough analysis of the sector and identified key challenges. The foreseen Communication, taking into consideration the increasing global competition that the EU forest-based industries are facing, will focus on measures to strengthen the framework conditions for the industries, in particular with reference to issues regarding energy and raw material. In this part it will build on the outcome of the work of the High Level Group on Competitiveness, Energy and the Environment. It will further include issues related to innovation and research and development as well as education, training and information activities.

Within the scope of the Action Plan, the **Commission** will facilitate exchanges of experience between Member States on developing guidelines for application of the Public Procurement Directive to forest products.

Key action 18: Improve information exchange and communication

Availability and communication of up-to-date information are essential for enhancing public awareness and consideration of forestry in policy-making.

The **Commission**, with active participation by the **Member States**, will develop a communication strategy on forestry. This will outline the main steps to be taken to improve communication on forestry in the Community. Exchanges of experience between the Member States will take place in the context of the preparation of the strategy. The feasibility of individual communication measures in the context of future international events on forests³¹ will also be explored.

²⁷ UN Convention on Biological Diversity, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN Convention to Combat Desertification, UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

²⁸ UN Forum on Forests, International Tropical Timber Agreement.

²⁹ COM(2003) 251 final.

³⁰ COM(1999) 457 final.

³¹ 6th Session of UN Forum on Forests: proposal to declare 2010 as the International Year of Forests.

The **Commission** will develop a “forestry” site on the Europa website. The **Member States** will make sure that forest-related information in their relevant websites is available and can be linked with the Europa forestry site.

In the context of the European forest monitoring system initiative, the **Commission** will work on the development of a European Forest Information and Communication Platform, in order to better use and communicate available information.

In addition, the **Member States** are encouraged to organise visibility events, such as a “Forest Week” or “Forest Day”, to raise awareness of the benefits of sustainable forest management.

4. EVALUATION

The Action Plan will span five years (2007–2011). A mid-term evaluation will take place in 2009 and a final evaluation will be carried out in 2012. A report on implementation of the Action Plan will be presented to the Council and the European Parliament in 2012.

Collaboration with stakeholders on implementation of the Action Plan at Community level will be channelled mainly through the Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork.

The Standing Forestry Committee will be the coordinating body between the Commission and Member States for implementation of the Action Plan. It will also be actively involved in the mid-term and final evaluations.