**Minutes**

Joint session of the Co-ordination Group for Biodiversity and Nature (CGBN) and the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC)

Friday 15 September 2017, 09:15-13:15
European Commission Conference Centre "Albert Borschette" – Room 0.D
36, rue Froissart - B-1040 Brussels (Schuman metro station)

**Co-Chairs:**
Claudia Olazabal European Commission, Head of Unit ENV.D.1 (Land use and management)
Mauro Poinelli European Commission, Head of Unit AGRI.D.4 (Environment, climate change, forestry and bio-economy)

**Documents:** See CGBN CIRCABC site

**Nature of the meeting:** Open for CGBN and SFC stakeholder members, no web-streaming.

1. **Welcome, introduction to the meeting objectives and approval of the agenda**

The co-chairs welcomed the two groups and stressed that preserving our natural capital was an issue for all actors involved. The joint meeting was therefore an excellent opportunity to promote dialogue and to identify areas and forms of cooperation on improved governance, so that sustainable forest management supports Natura 2000, the EU biodiversity objectives and sustainable development. Relevant policy frameworks were outlined, in particular the Action plan for nature, people and the economy, the EU biodiversity strategy to 2020 and the EU forest strategy.

The agenda was adopted with one change: a foreseen presentation of Regional Funds for forests had been cancelled.

2. **Nature Directives and EU forests**

   2.1. **Action plan for nature, people and the economy**

   *(See also PPT presentation on CIRCABC)*

   The Commission reminded of the importance of Annex I forest habitats for achieving the Nature Directives' objectives; referred to the findings of the 2015 State of Nature Report on the state of the EU forests; and presented the Action plan for nature, people and the economy, with a focus on the actions and sub-actions relevant to forests.

   - Action 1 (update, develop and promote guidance), especially guidance on Art. 6; and on incorporating ecosystem services into decision-making;
   - Action 3 (improve knowledge), especially the use of alternative information sources (such as citizen science), defining Favourable Reference Values, improving the Natura 2000 viewer and the uptake of open Earth observation data;
   - Action 4, especially regarding forest conservation measures, awareness raising and the engagement of forest stakeholders;
   - Action 5, especially regarding governance and the engagement of forest stakeholders;
- Action 6, especially regarding cooperation at biogeographical level including thematic events on forests in all biogeographical regions;
- Under Action 7, especially regarding support to stakeholder platforms to promote dialogue, exchange experience and knowledge, and cooperate on addressing conflicts
- Action 8, regarding LIFE projects to test tools for private land conservation in Natura 2000
- Action 9, regarding the effective use of EARDF funds for Natura 2000, and training & awareness raising through Farming Advisory Services.

The Commission also referred to the Roadmap guiding the CGBN's work in support of delivering on the broader EU biodiversity targets. The Roadmap focuses on actions under each biodiversity target that require increased efforts. Under Action 3B (Sustainable Forestry), the Roadmap refers to the CGBN role in exchanging experience and information on implementation aspects; in liaising with national and regional actors including forest stakeholders, in reinforcing dialogue and building capacities for biodiversity integration, as well as in providing input for policy and guidance definition, and in their dissemination. The Roadmap is a flexible, open document and is currently being updated to fully align with the Action plan for nature, people and the economy.

The following points were made in the discussion:

- Participants agreed that cooperation had to build on trust and mutual interest between the forest and the biodiversity conservation sectors. These were linked by different speakers to making different goals converge; clearing misunderstandings; engaging stakeholders in the definition of forest biodiversity measures; due consideration of socio-economic interests as well as to a sense of commitment and respect for EU law. The direct involvement of stakeholders in planning is a precondition of the successful implementation. The Commission underlined the role of Natura 2000 as a tool to build trust, asked MS to share existing trust-building mechanisms and asked for input on potential Commission's role.

- The question was raised of which mechanisms would be suitable to facilitate dialogue across policy areas in the implementation of the Nature Action Plan. The importance of engaging forest owners and managers, big and small, in the implementation of the action plan and in the design of forest biodiversity measures was repeatedly emphasized. Broad support was expressed for platforms and initiatives to strengthen dialogue and cooperation, highlighting the existence of a significant platforms' network structure, which could be optimized, paying attention to minimise burden on travel and work time and looking for synergies, back-to-back meetings, coordination among existing platforms, etc.

- These networks comprehend, e.g. the Civil dialogue group on forestry and cork, the ENRD, platforms within the biogeographical process, bilateral dialogues on the Environmental Implementation Review, the CoR and others. It was suggested to make an inventory of platforms as a starting point for further action.

- Participants referred to good examples of cooperation such as:
  - the Dutch Forest Code,
  - the organisation of provincial or sub-provincial forest owner groups that contributes to mutual learning between forestry stakeholders and nature authorities in Belgium,
  - work in France on regional forest strategies and green annexes to forest management plans,
  - the long-standing tradition of participation and dialogue with forest stakeholders in Austria,
  - the systematic use of integrated forest management plans in Slovenia which are used both at the operational level and as a tool for communication between sectors and interests,
Natura 2000 governance and funding mechanisms that have helped to move from conflict to gradual trust-building, many of which highlighted by the Natura 2000 Awards,

Irish research on behavioural insights (approaches resulting in change of agricultural practices to comply with the Nitrates Directive).

Climate change was highlighted as an issue for joint work towards mitigation and adaptation solutions. The Commission also referred to MAES (Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services) and to studies demonstrating the value generated by healthy forests for a wide range of stakeholders, and noted that forest owners need to be recognised by society for providing ecosystem services. Speakers stressed that sound funding was a precondition for forest biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, the economic viability of forest management is an important factor for ensuring the support of forestry stakeholders.

Differences were pointed out regarding methodologies and findings from assessments of the state of biodiversity in EU forests (EU State of Nature report compared to Forest Europe or FAO reports). The Commission explained the approach under the Nature Directives and referred to the Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services (MAES). Nevertheless this was an area where the Commission saw a need for further discussions since there had been for a long time a divergence of views between the different stakeholders.

Misunderstanding could be due to lack of communication and the need to better connect ecological and forestry knowledge. Dynamic versus static approaches to biodiversity conservation were touched upon. In this frame, the challenge of adapting to climate change was highlighted as a key issue for sustainable forest management.

One delegation questioned the appropriateness of non-intervention management regimes for biodiversity conservation in Natura 2000 areas. The Commission underlined that the main objective of Natura 2000 is to ensure the protection of habitats of European importance, including through their sustainable management and through integrating conservation objectives with land use.

It was noted that the EU guidance on Natura 2000 and forests, translated to several EU languages and widely distributed, has received very positive reactions from forestry stakeholders. The Commission recalled that this guidance document was developed in fruitful dialogue among nature and forestry stakeholders and Commission services.

In conclusion, the Commission noted the suggestions in terms of:

- Considering the enhanced use of existing stakeholder fora and structures where suitable, avoiding a duplication of efforts and WG fatigue, and minimising burden on work and travelling time.
- Areas to start could be climate change, best practices exchange for local, regional and national level, mechanisms to build trust and incentives, monitoring and assessment on the state and condition of forests. The Commission added that these suggestions could be considered also in view of future CGBN-SFC meetings.

### 2.2. Investing in Natura 2000 in EU forests

#### 2.2.1 Forestry measures under CAP Rural Development supporting Nature Directives' objectives

(See PPT presentation on CIRCABC)

The Commission reported preliminary figures on the state of play of forestry funding in rural development programmes, with an overview of implementation under the main forest/forestry-related measures. The Commission stressed the fact that Rural Development funding is the main...
source of EU funding for forest biodiversity, noted that the planned funding for forest environment measures was relatively low because during the previous implementation period, foresters and authorities had faced difficulties with this measure. Regarding contract updates, Natura 2000 and WFD payments were the leading measure for updates, with an increase from 129 to 200 million €.

The Commission further outlined the scope, timeline and objectives of the Evaluation study of the forestry measures under Rural Development, and provided an update on progress to date: the data collection and reporting stage has been completed and the contractor is working on the 1st preliminary final deliverable (see presentation for more detail).

2.2.2 LIFE Funding and the NCFF
(See PPT presentation on CIRCABC)

The Commission presented opportunities to fund forest conservation activities under the LIFE programme, as well as some good examples from ongoing and completed projects on the ground that provide solutions for biodiversity while also meeting societal goals. LIFE is entirely dedicated to environmental action, and this programme puts emphasis on better governance and links to high priority issues at EU level, including biodiversity loss. The catalytic role of LIFE was highlighted and how it can evolve into broader action, also to be funded under other programmes (e.g. RD). The Commission also presented the National Capital Financing Facility providing loans for biodiversity conservation measures, supported by the European Investment Bank, striving to bring together conservation and business approaches. So far one project has been launched and more are in the pipeline.

The chair opened the discussion by asking the members to comment on the use being made of the different funding opportunities; the main gaps or challenges (what is missing or not operative); and what could be improved especially regarding Rural Development measures to better address biodiversity needs.

The following main points were made in the discussion:

- This is a good moment to gather knowledge from all stakeholders and to exchange views with the MS on how to improve the RDP instrument. It was pointed out that the set of measures for forest biodiversity itself is very good but that uptake is insufficient probably due to several reasons.
- National choices of measures often do not sufficiently include forest biodiversity measures due to multiple objectives at play.
- Administrative burden. Obstacles were seen in relation to an unbalanced ratio between the size of the financial support and the amount of administrative work required to get it (which runs against the RDP target to support small-scale measures). Some regions therefore move to forestry measures with bigger volumes.
- Legal uncertainty. Some forestry stakeholders may also be concerned that implementing conservation measures could result in a stricter protection regime limiting the future use of a site.
- The area (ha)-based system for estimating the payments was challenged, and suggestions were made for a unit-based system. Also, the lower capping of payments related to forest environmental measures was identified as an obstacle, and that these payments do not reflect the value of secured or enhanced ecosystem services.
- Duration of forestry measures. Recommendations were made to consider a longer-time period obligatory to keep the measures (e.g. a minimum of 10 years) as more appropriate for results in
nature and forests, and to better approach the funding with the forest planning cycles. An approach similar to that of LIFE+ (on long-term sustainability of measures) was suggested for consideration in Rural Development measures (which can be taken off after a 5-year period).

- Tracking of funding to Natura 2000. Despite the target of dedicating 30% of the budget to environment and climate, two MS delegates questioned the current system for accounting, highlighting the current impossible tracking of effective budget spent on Natura 2000 and biodiversity-related measures, and the need for an ex-post tracking of such spending. The Commission reminded that indicators are already in place to track funding to priority areas and focus areas (including for environment, biodiversity, C-sequestration) and MS are reporting how much money has been spent on different priorities. The Commission reminded that an ECA report concluded on the lack of tracking for Natura 2000. This is linked to an action to develop indicators under the Action Plan for nature, people and the economy. The Commission also recalled the need that MS develop and update their national Natura 2000 funding plans.

- The need for payments that account for the entire value of forests, including forest ecosystems' goods and services, was noted.

- It was suggested that other EU funds (e.g. regional development programmes) should be tapped into for sustainable forest management, beyond rural development funds, and that the evaluation of forestry measures should look at their contribution to deliver on the EU Biodiversity Strategy Target 3B.

In conclusion, the Commission confirmed that all points have been noted and referred in particular to the raised issues of administrative burden, legal uncertainty, time horizons for measures, area-based payments, expenditure tracking and indicators (taking into account requests to keep the number of indicators as low as possible).

### 2.1. Initiatives on forest ecosystems and biodiversity

#### 2.3.1. MAES Forest Pilot and work to define forest ecosystem condition

(See PPT presentation, background note and methodological report on CIRCABC)

The Commission introduced the Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services (MAES) initiative. A methodological phase is almost completed. The framework for ecosystem condition assessment was discussed at a MAES workshop with Member States, scientists and stakeholders in June 2017, with a view to its completion by the end of 2017. At its meeting on 13 September, the MAES WG agreed that a refinement is needed for a consistent assessment framework across all ecosystem types; and for the selection of policy relevant indicators that can tell a consistent story and inform policy making.

The conceptual framework common to all ecosystems is based on the best available peer-reviewed scientific literature, and adapted to fit EU legal obligations (i.e. 'status' as defined under environmental legislation when applicable). For forest ecosystems, the framework was refined with the approach used for forest health and global change (Trumbore et al. 2015), complemented with information from Forest Europe (2015) and EEA (2016). It distinguishes between drivers-pressures (so-called 'disturbances') and state. A final synthesis report on ecosystem condition should be available by the end of 2017.

Next year the framework will be tested with real data to see whether it catches the correlation between pressure/state/services. A major constraint is on data, which must be spatially explicit, covering the whole of the EU and followed through time. This should eventually inform the final evaluation of the EU biodiversity strategy to 2020 and the debate on the post-2020 framework for biodiversity, as well as ecosystem-related sectoral policies.
The Commission asked the participants to look at the set of indicators for forests and provide feedback by end September 2017. Follow-up discussions would be needed in 2018 in the two groups.

2.3.2. **INTEGRATE network: initiative to integrate biodiversity objectives in forest management**  
(See PPT presentation, background note and methodological report on CIRCABC)

SFC members from DE and CZ presented the state of play and the planned next steps of the INTEGRATE network, an intergovernmental initiative for the further integration of biodiversity into forest management launched earlier this year in Bonn, Germany. The speakers invited newcomers to join the network and stressed the openness of the initiative to additional methods and themes.

**The following main points were made in the discussion:**

- Different participants expressed support to the Integrate initiative as a possibility for stakeholders to exchange and discuss challenges and learn from each other, and declared intentions to get involved in future work.
- The SFC member from PL expressed the interest of her Ministry to take over the networks’ presidency when the current CZ chairmanship finishes next year.
- Support was also expressed for work under MAES as an inclusive process; the constraints in existing data were emphasized.

3. **Concluding remarks**

The Commission expressed the view that the joint meeting has been useful and suggested that it would be good to continue the discussion. CGBN and SFC Members were asked for written feedback on this and possible future joint meetings, as well as for ideas on topics that could be addressed in a joint setting. Possible topics and follow-up picked from the discussion were:

- inventory of existing platforms vis-à-vis the needs for broad dialogue among nature and forestry stakeholders;
- addressing the issue of diverging assessment methodologies and results;
- developing cooperation with the CoR
- exchange of best practices and activities in the MS
- review of regional funding for forests – opportunities and challenges.

It was suggested that, in order to prepare for possible future joint discussions, Members should receive questions in advance to the meeting. It was also emphasized that potential future meetings should be organised in the most efficient way, e.g. back-to-back with other meetings.

4. **Next steps**

- Background report on MAES condition assessment uploaded on CIRCA: please look at the set of MAES indicators presented in the slides and send comments to ENV-BIODIVERSITY@ec.europa.eu by end November.
- Next INTEGRATE meeting in March 2018, Bonn: please consider opportunities to get engaged.
- Future joint CGBN/SFC meetings: please provide feedback on the need and, if relevant, on their frequency, setup, structure and themes following the meeting.
5. PARTICIPANTS

CGBN

**Member States**

1. AYMERICH Miguel – Spain
2. BEDNARZ Louise
3. BERTEL Edda-Maria - Austria
4. CABANIS Sophie - France
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35. WOLCZUK Beata - Poland
36. ZINGEL Hanno – Estonia

*Not represented: Lithuania.*

**NGOs and other stakeholders:**

1. BORKOWSKI Piotr - EUSTAFOR
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3. COLLINS Sue – EHF
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5. LANGHOUT Wouter – BirdLife
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