

## **EUSTAfor<sup>1</sup> Approach for an Integrated Wildfire Risk Management**

The European State Forest Association (EUSTAfor) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the European Commission's High-Level Roundtable Towards a Truly Integrated EU Approach on Wildfires.

EUSTAfor represents state forest organisations managing more than one-third of Europe's forests. EUSTAfor welcomes the recognition of a clear need to develop an integrated landscape approach to wildfire risk management that puts forests and forest management at the centre.

### **Increased risk and the need for integrative land- use, management, and territorial approaches**

Forest fire prevention and preparedness must be a central element of Europe's climate resilience and environmental strategies, as combined effects of climate change and land use change are increasing the frequency, intensity, and scale of wildfires across many regions, as well as its danger for people. The risk of catastrophic megafires is worryingly increasing. While emergency response remains important, effective fire prevention depends primarily on proactive forest management and strategic land-use planning that reduce vulnerability before fires occur.

The risk of wildfires has been increasing during the last decades driven by landscape changes, mostly due to land abandonment and countryside depopulation. In addition, climate change is also a key factor contributing largely to the increased risk, leading to already experienced severe droughts, extended summer periods and more recurrent and extreme heat-wave episodes. Many countries have now to extend their forest fire protection measures beyond the summer periods and in areas previously not at risk, and other ones are just facing a problem that they did not have to invest in and prioritise until now.

Land use and landscape/territorial scale approaches play a decisive role in shaping fire risk and fire behaviour. Landscape homogenisation, land abandonment leading to unmanaged afforestation, and the expansion of continuous, dense shrub or forest covers can significantly increase fuel loads and fire severity. In contrast, diversified land-use mosaics, with managed forests, with low density stands, combined with agriculture, grazing areas, and other open or semi-open landscapes, act as natural fire breaks, limit fire intensity, provide opportunities for firefighting and improve access for prevention and suppression activities. Prevention is crucial not only in terms of avoiding fires but also to reduce their severity and increase the suppression possibilities.

Active forest management, supported by appropriate land-use planning, can reduce fire risk through structural diversification of forests, fuel management, and the integration of prevention infrastructure such as access roads, water reserves, and fuel breaks (including firewalls and low combustibility belts). Land-use change measures, including the restoration of degraded land, reforestation with climate-adapted and mixed species, and the maintenance of low-yield or marginal lands as strategic buffer zones, can further enhance fire resilience at landscape/territorial scale.

### **A need for existing policy integration, active forest management and public awareness**

Forest fire prevention policies must therefore move beyond the forest stand level and adopt an integrated, landscape/territorial-based approach; forest fire policies should look at the issue both from a socioeconomic and

---

<sup>1</sup>Any statement in this document is to be considered as a reflection of the best available professional expertise and does not necessarily reflect the political commitments of individual member organisations.

environmental perspective. Existing EU policies impacting forests such as nature conservation, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, resilience, etc as well as funding mechanisms should be coherent and support land-use strategies that balance forest expansion, biodiversity objectives, rural livelihoods, and fire risk reduction. Policies must allow for active forest management, instead of adding limitations and burdens to develop a responsible and prevention-friendly land management. By aligning land-use planning, active management, and climate adaptation goals, Europe can significantly reduce wildfire impacts while strengthening the long-term resilience of its forests and communities.

Additionally, preventive management should also be accompanied by public awareness and education measures, as human activity is responsible for most wildfire ignitions. This element should not be forgotten, and the EU policies should include public education and awareness raising as part of the solution.

### **Financing Wildfire Prevention Through Long-Term Investment and a Resilient Forest Bioeconomy**

Implementing effective forest fire prevention and landscape/territorial-level management is costly and requires long-term investment as well as long term policy reliance. Forest managers bear significant financial and operational responsibilities and costs related to fuel reduction, infrastructure, monitoring, conservation, and post-disturbance restoration, often without adequate compensation for the public goods these actions provide beyond the selling of timber.

To ensure sustained prevention efforts, dedicated funding mechanisms must be developed and complemented by policies that strengthen the forest-based bioeconomy and facilitate national integration and implementation. Enhancing the viability and value of sustainable forest products, such as wood for construction, bio-based materials, and energy from residual biomass, can help finance active management, reduce excess fuel loads, maintain resilient forest structures, and reduce fire risk while supporting rural livelihoods, thus fighting against the depopulation of remote or disadvantaged territories. At the same time, innovation in the bioeconomy sector can also benefit other regions increasingly becoming at risk of experiencing forest fires. By ensuring a healthy, resilient and competitive forestry sector, it can be guaranteed in return that fuel loads are kept low, and forests fire risk is kept at its minimum. A resilient bioeconomy is therefore not only an economic objective but a critical enabler of effective forest fire prevention and climate resilience. Supporting innovation, market development, and value chains for these materials is essential to ensure that prevention measures are economically sustainable, socially viable, and scalable across Europe.

### **Sharing Knowledge and Aligning Conservation Policies to Address Expanding Wildfire Risk Across Europe**

Climate change is not only worsening the issue in Mediterranean regions. Wildfire-related challenges are gradually affecting Central and Northern European countries as well. Knowledge and best practices as well as lessons learned from decades of fighting and managing wildfires in Mediterranean countries already exist and can now be mainstreamed. It is essential to build governance and exchange mechanisms that not only enable the sharing of successful experiences and best practices but also that facilitate policy implementation at the Member state level.

Additionally, wildfires also represent one of the greatest threats to the species and ecosystems within the Natura 2000 Network and other protected areas. Conservation and management policies must be fully aligned and coordinated with wildfire prevention and management strategies at EU level and backed by adequate funding. One-sided policy approaches or strictly protectionist approaches have unintentionally increased vulnerability, bringing protected areas and forest ecosystems at a higher risk of wildfire.