

Sustainable Forestry for Rural Livelihoods ⁽¹⁾

EUSTAFOR's seven recommendations to further enhance rural development policy post-2020 – for people, climate and the economy

Introduction

Forests can greatly contribute to the current priorities of the European Union ⁽²⁾, especially those referring to: “Jobs, Growth and Investment” and “Energy Union and Climate.” In a more global perspective, Europe's forests make an invaluable contribution towards fulfilling the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The importance of forests is recognized by the [EU Forest Strategy](#), which “ensures a coherent, holistic approach to forest management, covers the multiple benefits of forests, integrates internal and external forest-policy issues, and addresses the whole forest value-chain.”

The EU's Rural Development Policy is the main tool to support the implementation of sustainable forest management and, thus, enable contributions of forests to improve competitiveness and job creation, in particular in rural areas, while ensuring forest protection, the delivery of ecosystem services and inducing positive trends in the further development of forest resources. The latter was confirmed in the [Cork 2.0 Declaration](#) which defines the role of forestry as an engine of rural growth and was further confirmed in the Commission's Communication [The Future of Food and Farming](#). It is therefore essential that forests and sustainable forest management (SFM) stay at the core of the EU's Rural Development Policy (RDP), also after 2020.

Consequently, the following seven recommendations should be taken into account in further work on the new RDP:

1. Adaptive forest management needs to be supported

Forests play a significant role in mitigating climate change. Sustainably managed forests provide emission removals, carbon storage, and carbon displacement if wood is used as a substitute for non-renewable materials. However, only healthy and vital forest ecosystems can fulfill their expected roles. While forests and forestry are also heavily affected by climate change, it is essential to ensure the present and future adaptability of Europe's forests to climate change by investing in innovative, adaptive forest management systems, including those related to gene conservation and plant propagation materials, forest health and disease control, etc.

2. The risk resilience of forests must become a priority

Forests prevent erosion, especially in mountainous regions, and provide a significant mitigation of floods. Sustainably managed forests also contribute to the provision of clean water, a resource at risk due to climate change. Changing climate has also increased erosion, especially along Europe's Atlantic coastline where investments are necessary for managing this environment in order to stabilize dunes and minimize negative impacts.

¹ 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 organizations.

² <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/photo/photoByPriorities.cfm?sitelang=en>



In recent decades, the weakening resilience of forests has been an increasing problem. European forests have been gradually exposed to various biotic and non-biotic agents, such as large-scale outbreaks of pests and diseases as well as more frequent extreme weather phenomena, such as storms, heavy rain or snow falls, heat waves and extended periods of draught. The large wildfires of recent years not only threatened human lives and the economy of the local communities, they also had a detrimental effect on the forest carbon sink.

More effective measures must be taken so that European forests can better withstand these negative effects. To fight forest fires and other threats when they occur is no longer enough: they need to be prevented. This can be effectively done through further investments in SFM, the diffusion of agroforestry systems, as well as through the development of infrastructure such as forest roads, modern hydrological systems and water reservoirs.

3. Sustainable management of existing forests is as important as afforestation

The creation of new woodlands was an important objective in the previous RDP. Forest resources have been significantly expanded with an increase of the [afforested area](#) over the last 20 years larger than the size of Portugal. As a result, land easily available for afforestation has significantly decreased. In future, more attention should be given to the management of newly established and already existing forests, which have the potential to greatly contribute to climate change mitigation through an uptake of carbon dioxide and to substitute for fossil materials through an increase in the availability of wood. Investments in active forest management as well as in agrosilvopastoral systems are necessary not only for rural development but also for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Moreover, continued innovation and investments in forestry are essential to improve existing forest stands and enhance their quality, which should result in enhanced dynamics and productivity of their ecosystems.

4. State forests must be recognized as enablers of the rural renaissance

As the next major economic development, the bioeconomy is especially important in rural and remote areas of Europe. Forests provide input for the bioeconomy in the form of renewable materials, as well as other ecosystem services, needed to create the much-needed shift to a sustainable society. State Forest Management Organizations (SFMOs) provide biomass for a multitude of forest-based value cycles and, thanks to their scale, stability, and reliability, they can catalyze the bioeconomic development while also making a positive impact on energy security and the supply of goods.

The bioeconomy should be perceived as an opportunity to enhance the quality and vitality of ecosystems and to promote green employment and social inclusion, while at the same time increasing the social values of forests for the benefit of all. There is a need to enhance the synergies of using wood and improving land management by raising consumer awareness of sustainable production and consumption patterns. The RDP post-2020 should also aim to facilitate new innovation partnerships, which are of great importance for rural development.

5. State forests contribution to biodiversity and Natura 2000 should be better recognized

The RDP is a major EU tool to support the implementation of the EU's biodiversity targets. Biodiversity is a key element in sustainable forest management in state forests, during both the planning and implementation phases. SFMOs, with their expertise in sustainable forest management – based on a sound forest inventory and management planning – can ensure the implementation of measures on a large scale. However, in order for the biodiversity and Natura 2000 objectives to be met, the RDP post-2020 must ensure that the incentives are provided based on the implementation results achieved.

6. Supporting the delivery of ecosystem services from multifunctional state forests is crucial

In addition to raw materials and biodiversity, forests provide a variety of other goods and ecosystem services to society at large. SFMOs are usually expected to provide these at their own expense, whereas they also need to achieve economic objectives and goals, just like any other market operator.

To best serve society's needs, the majority of state forests remain accessible to European citizens. However, there are still large areas where access is not possible, such as the mined forests in the Western Balkans. Considering the social and ecological risks, it is critical to ensure that these forests become accessible again, allowing local people to take full advantage of the ecological and social features of state forests.

Any extra costs resulting from the provision of ecosystem services, which are not paid for by the market, need to be taken into consideration by support systems – such as the RDP post-2020 – in order to secure the economic viability of forest management.

7. Incentives must be based on the provision of services rather than on the type of ownership

Currently, SFMOs are, in many cases, not entitled to EU funding to compensate for increased expenditures and income forgone due to the conservation of biodiversity and the provision of ecosystem services. Whereas the monetary benefits for society can be great, the economically self-standing SFMOs alone bear the costs, which arise, for example, due to the exclusion of specific operations and the requirements to move away from commercial activities in designated areas.

The provision of ecosystem services to the public should always be economically sound and, when this is not possible, it must be supported on the basis of clear and ambitious policy objectives. In EUSTAFOR's view, such support should, therefore, be provided regardless of ownership or enterprise type.

Conclusion

Sustainably managed European state forests contribute to balancing various forest functions, meeting society's multiple demands and delivering vital ecosystem services, while providing a basis for the entire forest-based value chain to be competitive and viable contributors to the bio-based economy. Forests play a major role in the economic development of rural areas and, in addition to the farming sector, represent a significant source of employment.

The eligibility of organizations managing state forests to benefit from measures which are prioritized by the EU policies with regards to rural development is a precondition for further developing sustainably managed and resilient European forests which can then significantly contribute towards achieving the strategic objectives of the European Union.

EUSTAFOR's 33 members (state forest organizations managing state forests) represent around one third of the EU forest area. They are committed to sustainable forest management and work with existing forest certification schemes. The total harvest of EUSTAFOR members is over 130 million m³ of round timber per annum and together they directly employ more than 100 000 individuals.