

EUSTAFOR Position Paper (1)

The new EU Forest Strategy post-2020: Ensuring consistency among EU forest-related policies through clear objectives and feasible targets

This paper presents the views of the European State Forest Association (EUSTAFOR) on the EU Forest Strategy post-2020 (EU FS post-2020). It reflects the expectations of EUSTAFOR's 36 member organizations, state forest managers from 25 European countries, who carry out sustainable forest management (SFM) on a daily basis.

More than 1/3 of Europe is covered by forests, providing a wealth of economic, environmental, and social benefits for all Europeans. Up to 1/3 of Europe's forests are owned by states, which means that they belong to the citizens of Europe. As managers of these common European assets, European state forest management organizations (SFMOs) share the following vision of how the upcoming EU FS post-2020 may enable European forests to help build a future-fit Europe.

Over the last years, the EU and international forest policy frameworks have strongly evolved. The crucial role of forests and the forest-based sector is recognized by the EU Green Deal, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, the climate mitigation goals of the Paris Agreement, as well as other international commitments and initiatives. EUSTAFOR strongly believes the future Strategy should serve as a tool to reconcile other forest-related policies so that the demands placed on forests by policymakers neither diminish their multifunctional character nor allow one objective to dominate all others.

The following policy messages are, therefore, proposed as the input from SFMOs to the ongoing debate on the key objectives of the EU FS post-2020:

1. The EU needs a straightforward forest land use strategy

The EU Forest Strategy post-2020 should serve as a clear land-use framework to enable the further development of forest resources while taking into account economic, social, environmental, as well as different regional considerations. It should consist of clear EU-wide strategic objectives for forests and their multiple outputs. It should be built on the pan-European concept of National Forest Programs and Member State (MS) experiences. A straightforward land-use strategy would facilitate long-term planning and legal certainty for forest owners, managers, and the downstream value chains.

The FS post-2020 should undertake the challenge of solving existing and potential conflicts between forests and all other land uses, stakeholders, and interest groups through spatial planning at landscape level. It should strive to avoid incoherencies between policy objectives for forests versus those for nature and land protection, provide clear guidance on priorities for forest land use, and assist in solving issues related to ownership.

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 states.

2. Afforestation, reforestation, and restoration offer solutions for a future-fit Europe

The Strategy must recognize that forest ecosystems have natural limitations and that further development of forest resources, including forest area expansion, can only be accomplished through effective and thoroughly planned afforestation, reforestation and regeneration of forests damaged by biotic and non-biotic agents. The Strategy must, therefore, consider the entire forest cycle and promote all the numerous ecological and socio-economic services forests provide ⁽²⁾. Only then can the potential of forests to contribute to achieving a future-fit Europe by absorbing and storing CO₂, delivering renewable climate-friendly raw materials, and substituting for energy-intensive materials and products, be increased.

3. Forest adaptation, health, and resilience must be ensured now more than ever

An EU-wide approach to the protection and containment of biotic risks is needed, together with an EU level review of susceptibility and resistance to abiotic threats. This approach must take into account that any EU-wide policy will need to be transposed to a very broad diversity of jurisdictions. Therefore, the Strategy should provide an extensive platform to ensure effective technical, scientific and policy cooperation and experience exchange, as well as necessary policy means and adequate funding.

Thousands of hectares of state forests across Europe are under pressure from repeated damage to forests due to different abiotic (e.g. fire, wind, drought, snow) and biotic threats (e.g. pests, insects, diseases, animals). Significant resources are needed for renewing destroyed stands and adapting them to changing climatic conditions.

The EU Strategy must, therefore, address topics such as adaptive forest management, managing ecosystem changes, tree species composition, genetic fitness, forest ecosystem modeling, forest management planning and mapping, a European-wide monitoring network, research and information dissemination, as well as necessary infrastructure.

4. Forests are a multifaceted part of the solution to climate mitigation and carbon

The oversimplified view of seeing forests exclusively as carbon sinks, while ignoring their role in carbon storage in harvested wood products (HWP) and substitution for fossil-based materials and energy, must be supplanted. EUSTAFOR's most [recent publication](#) highlights the potential of sustainable forest management (SFM) to tackle climate change. It provides a variety of concrete examples of good practices for climate mitigation and adaptation.

The EU FS post-2020 should promote the role of forests and the forest-based sector in mitigating climate change through:

- Sequestration as a long-term goal and the role of wood in storing carbon and substituting for fossil-based products.
- A robust and coherent methodology for the measurement of carbon sequestration and emission levels in forestry, which includes land type, silviculture practices and species attributes. The methodology should embrace the full life cycle assessment for both wood production and woodland protection.
- Impact assessments of and financial support (EU and national) frameworks for climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1596443911913&uri=CELEX:52019DC0640#document2>

5. Biodiversity and nature are embedded within SFM

It must be acknowledged that sustainable forest management is not only compatible with the conservation of biodiversity and nature but, in most cases, actively contributes to its maintenance and enhancement ⁽³⁾. Furthermore, European forests provide a home for biodiversity and nature at a scale that cannot be offered by any other land use.

The management of state forests, in particular, is exemplary for maintaining their multifunctionality, including the promotion of biodiversity, by applying appropriate silvicultural methods within and outside protected areas.

This does not negate the strong need for credible monitoring of biodiversity that can serve as a basis for continuously revising biodiversity and nature conservation objectives, followed by the designation of Natura 2000 sites and setting clear objectives in conservation plans in line with forest management objectives.

6. Boost the bioeconomy, research, and innovation

The contribution of forest-based value chains in reaching the Green Deal's objectives should be recognized and, wherever possible, timber should be classified as a preferred building product ahead of carbon-intensive products, such as concrete and steel. Research and innovation in relation to fiber-based bio-products should be further improved and employed to extend the scope of the circular bioeconomy.

EUSTAFOR welcomes the fact that the Commission's President acknowledged the benefits of using wood in construction as part of the forthcoming Renovation Wave. Advanced engineering is enabling architects to build better, bigger and higher with timber. Considering that in the last two decades the forest area is increasing and, most importantly, the annual growth of forests is consistently higher than the rate of harvesting, European forests will remain significant contributors to this plan.

However, while SFM plays a crucial role in achieving sustainability goals through the implementation of the circular bioeconomy, an emerging issue is the understanding – and therefore the acceptance – of the harvesting process and the subsequent options for the uses of the different types of woody biomass.

7. Beyond wood – forests offer ecosystem services, the social use of forests, and recreation

The EU FS post-2020 should establish a value-based framework for ecosystem services which clearly prioritizes competing forestry objectives based on demonstrable data.

All ecosystem services are equally important for state forests. One of the main challenges for forest management, therefore, is to deliver all these services without compromising any of them. On the one hand, there is a growing expectation for forests to deliver social services ⁽⁴⁾ while, on the other hand, there is a lack of public understanding on how to reach a balance between competing forestry objectives (e.g. wood harvesting versus habitat protection) and determining where they can and cannot co-exist.

³ https://eustafor.eu/uploads/EUSTAFOR_Natura_2000_Booklet_20191218-compressed_compressed.pdf

⁴ According to Forest Europe Report (2015), 75% of countries report that access to at least 90% of their forests and other wooded lands was made available to the public for recreational purposes in 2010.

8. Balanced communication on SFM and its benefits must be based on real forest monitoring

By highlighting the advantages of developing a credible forest information system, including the multiple benefits of SFM, the EU FS post-2020 can start to redress the misunderstanding and growing lack of social acceptance of SFM. Such a forest information system should, of course, use the most innovative methodologies and technical solutions. However, the collected and reported data must be corroborated with national forest monitoring and forest management statistics of the competent MS authorities. A complete and balanced overview of all aspects of forest management – social, environmental, but also economic – needs to be provided in order to give a fair and comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by SFM.

9. The sustainable and multifunctional management of forests requires adequate financing

The EU is developing very ambitious expectations concerning forests in its policies on climate change, biodiversity, the bioeconomy, rural development, and renewable energies. The EU should, at the same time, allocate substantial attention to the financial aspects which will allow forest managers and owners to make these expected deliveries.

Currently, opposition to the management of forests for economic purposes has become a societal debate. Policy debates, as well, often overlook the fact that high-quality responsible forest management requires dedicated funding to improve aspects of ecosystem services and social benefits. Biodiversity, carbon sequestration, water purification, etc., are only very rarely funded and the currently available support through the agricultural fund for rural development, for example, does not meet this challenge.

The new EU Forest Strategy should recognize that forest management is a part of the open market economy. Currently, it is mainly timber and hunting which provide the necessary funding for the multifunctional management of public forests. New forest-related policies must, therefore, not limit the economic development of forests without either proposing alternative operational sources of financing or providing specific, dedicated funding.

10. The EU has a global forest responsibility

The EU should promote the pan-European concept of SFM and work to strengthen the application of sustainable forest management practices both globally, to halt deforestation and forest degradation, and increase cooperation between all countries in the European region.

The EU FS post-2020 should be a vehicle to coordinate the elaboration of common positions of the EU and its Member States, including overseas areas, through a transparent and inclusive dialogue with relevant stakeholders, taking into account different regional realities. The EU and its MS have a long, positive story to tell about SFM, the role of forests, and all its goods and services in our daily lives.

In summary, EUSTAFOR is deeply convinced that the main tool to integrate European forests and the forest-based sector into the Green Deal should be a robust EU Forest Strategy post-2020, as a framework for a consistent and well-coordinated action at EU level.

In view of the recent Council Conclusions of 11 November 2020 on Perspectives for the EU Forest-Related Policies and EU Forest Strategy post-2020 and the European Parliament Resolution of 8 October 2020 on the European Forest Strategy - The Way Forward, EUSTAFOR calls on the European Commission to develop a strong, self-standing, coherent and holistic EU FS post-2020. The Strategy should serve as a central policy instrument to support and promote SFM, making clear references to the equal relevance of its three pillars – economic, environmental, and social. It should ensure the health and vitality of forest ecosystems and their capacity to deliver multiple benefits to society.

Furthermore, EUSTAFOR would like the relevance of state forests for the broad spectrum of issues mentioned above to be recognized in future EU decisions. The future of European forests – with their long life cycles – depends on the political and managerial decisions that are made today, as well as on the efforts of thousands of forest professionals and workers at field level. With their knowledge and expertise, state forest managers can actively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how Europe's forests can help to accomplish the multiple demands being made on them.

EUSTAFOR looks forward to working with all relevant partners to ensure that forests are managed wisely and responsibly, for the benefit of all.