



Sustainable forest management in Europe plays a central role in reaching the EU climate change targets and strengthening the EU bioeconomy strategy.

Forests produce an impressive number of essential products and services for society, they are a major source of carbon storage in the context of climate change, and they are home to a great deal of biodiversity. However, these benefits are not free of charge; they are heavily dependent on a competitive and economically viable forest sector in Europe.

Robert FLIES, ELOA adviser

Forests, covering more than 40% of land area in the EU, are at the center of important global and regional societal challenges. Contrary to tropical forests, the forest area in the EU has increased steadily over the last 30 years as a result of afforestation and changes in vegetation after abandonment of farming or grazing. Timber remains the main source of financial revenue from forests and forest biomass represents the most important source of renewable energy in the EU. The forest-based economy, based *inter alia* on a large range of specialised SMEs, is an essential part of rural economies and provides around 4 million jobs in Europe. Although essential from an environmental, economic and social point of view, the viability of the forest sector re-

mains fragile in most regions of Europe and climate change negatively affects forest ecosystems by diminishing their resilience in facing natural and biological threats.

60% of European forests are privately owned, mostly by individuals and families with small and fragmented properties. The multiple goods and services provided by these forest areas thereby rely on more than 16 million forest owners.

The attitudes and forest management objectives of most private forest owners are varied. They want above all to preserve their property for future generations, take care of forest health, and maintain the resilience of their resour-

es. They therefore apply the principles of sustainable forest management to their holdings with the objective of providing renewable bio-materials together with a great number of ecosystem services. The heterogeneity of forest ownership should in principle not be considered as a problem *per se*, but as an asset for multifunctional forestry. Diverse management objectives are generally best suited to local and regional conditions. Even so, there remains considerable room for structural and strategic alliances between privately owned forest managing units to address climate change and technical modernization challenges.

European private forest owners are supportive of the EU Forest Strategy and the



Forest fires in the South of Europe in 2017

principles of sustainable forest management (SFM) as defined by the Ministerial resolutions of the Forest Europe process.

There are no provisions for a common forestry policy in the EU. The action framework is embedded in a legally non-binding forest strategy, determining the interactions between forest policies of Member States (MS) and relevant EU policies dealing with forest issues, in line with the principle of subsidiarity. A number of MS forest programmes and regulations have their origin in European initiatives. In a way, one can argue that MS forest policies have become European to a certain extent. A key question for the future revision of the EU Forest Strategy is: *how to build up a governance arrangement that works for those who are expected to implement European policies, strategies, directives and regulations, e.g. in this case, the forest owners and managers of the MS?* Experience within the European forest sector has so far shown that the follow-up to EU actions can face substantial difficulties if political will and acceptance among forest owners and forest administrations in MS is lacking.

An impressive number of public goods and services are provided by forests, for example, renewable raw materials, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and nature protection, landscapes, cultural heritage, protection against soil erosion, water and air management.

Forest managers and owners are best placed to provide such societal benefits

and climate change mitigation measures in combination with the production of sustainable and renewable forest products at relatively low cost. Placing a value on forest-related public goods and services, exploring the potential for market-based solutions, and putting them in place to support voluntary forestry initiatives and actions would be a major step forward in tackling current societal challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, and would be by far more effective than additional regulations.

The bio-based economy is expected to play an increasingly important role in the future and the forest sector remains a key cornerstone of it.

A fundamental basis of successful development of a forest-based bio-economy is the sustainable use of our forest resources. The role of the traditional forest industries is thereby crucial, because current timber and wood companies form a solid platform for the development of new innovative products. If Europe wants to have a sustainable bio-economy sector, it should first of all maintain and safeguard the timber and wood sector and strike the right balance between ecological protection and economic interests. Finally, research and knowledge sharing need to be reinforced in order to push the development and distribution of innovative bio-based processes and products forward.

Forests contribute to achieving climate change mitigation objectives by absorb-

ing carbon dioxide and storing carbon in trees and timber products. However, they are at the same time particularly vulnerable to climate change, and the long lifespan of trees doesn't allow for rapid adaptation to climatic changes.

EU agriculture and forestry activities remove approximately 9% of the greenhouse gases emitted in other parts of the economy. Forests provide bio-materials that can act as temporary carbon stores and as substitutes that replace carbon-intensive materials and fuels. Forest biomass from forest by-products, harvest residues and low-quality thinning wood is an essential but also limited factor to meet EU climate and renewable energy targets and comply with international climate change agreements. This is unfortunately only one side of the coin because climate change may also considerably reduce forest ecosystem resilience which can have a dramatic impact on the health of forest ecosystems and inevitably lead to an increase in pests and fungal diseases.

ELD will continue to advocate for concrete solutions that give guidelines to forest managers on how to adapt their sites to climatic changes, such as a European platform of forest experts that monitor the impact of climate change on forests. It will also continue to deal with the main challenges as discussed in January during the Intergroup "Sustainable hunting, biodiversity, countryside activities and forestry" [You can read the summary on p.6].