

## **Bulgaria: severe changes in the forestry sector**

The forestry sector in Bulgaria is facing unprecedented challenges from the transition to a market economy, restitution and EU Accession. New laws have come into force and their content has been continuously amended.

One of the crucial events came with the reconstruction of the forest sector in 1997. A market oriented economy was pursued, so many private harvesting firms appeared. These firms conducted harvesting only in very good quality forest stands with high income potential. The young plantations, mainly coniferous, that urgently needed thinning and the conversion of coppice stands to high stem forest were not popular because of their low revenue. Many mature forests have been logged out. Illegal harvesting methods have developed and become more difficult to control. Deliberately set forest fires as well as unfavourable dry weather conditions have led to many hectares burnt forest – about 3.5 % of the forest area between 1991 and 2001. The rehabilitation of the fire sites is still to be completed.

All these problems provoked the necessity of new reconstruction in the forestry sector. Undoubtedly, the most relevant and important event concerning protection of Bulgarian forests at the moment is the Forest Development Project. Its implementation is planned for the period 2004-2010 with a loan from the World Bank. The objective of the project is to increase the contribution of forests to the national economy and maximise the opportunities and benefits to the rural population. Global benefits from the project will be realised through improved conservation of ecosystems, integrating conservation activities into routine forest management and strengthening the network of protected areas. The project will:

- Identify areas with high conservation value forests
- Undertake conservation activities and integrate them into regular forest management operations
- Improve planning, monitoring, and coordination for nature parks
- Strengthen the capacity of individual nature parks to preserve critical habitats
- Assist the establishment of the Protected Areas Endowment Fund, thus stimulating its expansion and revenues with additional resources coming from domestic and international private sector organisations, the Government of Bulgaria, and international donors

However, the implementation steps are rather vague and the above mentioned are still good wishes. Establishment of a national State Forest Company (NFC) with an essentially commercial mandate and a State Forest Administration (SFA) with a control and supervisory function is also part of the new plans. It is also believed that this new company would solve the problem of illegal harvesting, for which no official survey was carried out, but which is a massive problem.

At the end of 2003, the environmental impact assessment of the project was reported. In the comments on that report, Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB, BirdLife in Bulgaria) insisted on FSC certification in Bulgaria, required real (and not estimated) figures on illegal harvesting, and stood against protected areas falling under the jurisdiction of the company. BSPB argued that it was not reasonable for one institution to conduct two incompatible functions – commercial and controlling. Having no financial benefits from the protected forest areas, the company would not direct money for conservation activities, and pursuing profits, could even put in practice some devastating measures for the wildlife. BSPB also expressed its concerns that little attention was being paid on the issue of afforestation with non-native tree species.

Thanks to the proposals and the efforts of BSPB, one protected site of 1,926 ha including old-growth beech and fir forests was declared in 2003. In 2003, BSPB also succeeded in enlarging the Nature Park "Sinite Kamani" territory with new 4,943 ha. Significant parts of it were old-growth forest. At the moment BSPB is running a new proposal for cross-border "Nature Parks", including Greece and Macedonia, protecting the old-growth chestnut forests of Belassitza Mountain. The Ministry of Environment and Waters approved the proposal and the preparation of documentation was assigned to the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation. Three proposals for conservation of riverine forests along Maritza and Tundja river are under procedure of approval, and some additional territories of riverine forests along Tundja river are under investigation.

**Veronika Ferdinandova, BSPB**

## **Russia: Danger – a new Forest Code!**

From the middle of 2003 a new Forest Code is being developed in Russia. This will be the main legislative basis for all forest activities, logging rights and forest land use. If the document is passed by the State Duma and signed by the President, it will destroy a system of state management and control over forest use without creating any substitute.

Journalists, other observers and people who work in the Natural Resources Ministry were given documents explaining why the new edition of the Code is dangerous, and a statement was made on the issue made by Russian environmental public organisations.

The new Code is based on ideas of the liberalisation of forest use. Many things are borrowed from present and rather effective forest laws of Scandinavian countries and Canada. However, developers have transformed them, freeing themselves of obligations to society and nature. The new Code has been developed during the last six months by officials of the Ministry of Economic Development of the RF with minimal involvement of forest experts.

In case the document is passed, old environmental, social and economic problems of the forest complex of the country will inevitably become worse and new problems will appear. The new Code makes it possible to privatise forests - without clear rules, in about the same way as industrial and agricultural enterprises were privatised in the 1990s. The project also gives permission to carry out logging in all specially protected nature areas, including those where at present logging is prohibited (reserves). Moreover, the new edition of the Code will make all efforts to create new reserves and national parks almost senseless. Finally, the project is going to destroy the existing system of forest management at a local level and to create more additional agencies at the federal and local levels. This project means a pure bureaucratic revolution: well-functioning working structures will be destroyed and a number of new well-paid officials will increase.

During the last few years one of the most complicated problems concerning the Forest Code has been illegal logging and trade in illegal timber. The new Code makes it even worse. After it is passed, there will not be any standard documents at the state level that will confirm the legality of a certain logging. It will become much easier to transfer illegal timber. At the same time it will be more difficult to control the enforcement of legislation by forest users, and no state body of control will be able to evaluate real logging volumes in a rented territory (even if it is small enough).

It seems that our officials want to carry out another experiment with our country's forestry. However, by conducting a wide public discussion, it will be possible to create reasonable and workable future uses of the Code, that take into account social, economic and environmental concerns.

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