

New EU Forest Strategy: good intentions but few teeth

Title

In September, the European Commission finally published its long-awaited [Forest Strategy](#). The text, which will replace the existing one from 2008, presents some good elements. It includes recognition of the multi-functions of forests. That is to say a recognition that forests serve economic, social and environmental purposes, as well as of the numerous ecosystem services they deliver. The strategy fails however to address the conflicts arising from the increasing demands on forests from different sectors, notably the growing demand in biomass from the energy sector.

Forests host a large range of wildlife and ecosystems delivering numerous services and public goods that benefit the economy and society overall. European forests are still recovering from historic overexploitation and much of their biodiversity is in a bad state. New threats to our forests keep building in the form of climate change and related extreme weather and from the growing invasion of alien species. Current EU and national laws on forests are too weak to manage these threats and they are therefore unable to protect the forests.

The new strategy is a signal of EU's willingness to do better in protecting its forests but at the same time it lacks proposals for concrete action. The strategy proposes different elements aiming to enhance the sustainability of forest management in Europe, such as Sustainable Forest Management criteria. Such criteria could mitigate the pressure put on forests by the increasing demand on biomass driven by the [EU renewable energy targets](#) (by 2020, 20% of the EU energy consumption must come from renewable sources. One key way to reach this target is to burn wood and plants to produce energy).

The strategy also aims to ensure that forest policies developed by EU Member States contribute to the full implementation of the [Natura 2000 Network](#) and of the [Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 of the Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#). If achieved it would help halting the loss of forest biodiversity and even contribute to its recovery.

Less encouraging are certain gaps that would need to be filled for the strategy to deliver for the forests. These gaps include tools to monitor the implementation of the strategy and compulsory communication from the Member States on the state of the forests. These are needed for the EU to evaluate the fate of its forests and take action if necessary. It is also essential that the strategy defines the quantity of resources forests can actually sustainably supply, while taking into account timber, social and environmental needs.

The most fundamental problem with the new strategy is its limited legal power. The European

Commission has in fact no responsibility in the forest area; therefore the strategy is no more than a 'line of conduct' and it is not binding for the Member States. Nevertheless, it is still valuable for those countries that want to do well in terms of forest management. The strategy is also an open door for the Commission to make proposals to correct the EU's flawed approach to bioenergy and to enforce proper implementation of EU nature legislation with regards to forest management.

Read our latest publication on forest [Responsibly managing European Boreal forests - a case study from Sweden?](#)
