In its forest strategy tabled in July, the European Commission has underlined the crucial role played by forests in absorbing carbon dioxide and meeting the EU’s climate targets, setting out plans to plant 3 billion trees before the end of the decade.

But forests also fulfil other functions, like providing jobs to local communities and offering substitutes to fossil fuels, which also weigh in the balance when putting together an EU forest policy. Find out more in this EURACTIV special report.
Contents

Hackles raised over 'unbalanced' forest policy ahead of EU ministerial meeting 4

Finnish MEP: 'I'm against the power creep in the EU's forest strategy' 6

What role for forests and the forest-based sector in the EU Green Deal? 9
EU countries, industry and lawmakers are pushing back against the European Commission’s new forest strategy, criticising a lack of balance between the different roles performed by forests - economic, social and environmental.

Governments across the 27-nation bloc are concerned that the forest strategy encroaches on their rights and ignores the multiple uses of trees, EU sources have told EURACTIV ahead of a meeting of environment ministers on Wednesday (6 October).

Climate and biodiversity are all properly dealt with in the strategy but the economic and social aspects were not given sufficient consideration, an EU diplomat told EURACTIV.

“We see in discussions [between EU countries] that perhaps things are not addressed in a balanced approach,” said Dan Burgar Kuželički, under secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food in Slovenia, which currently holds the rotating EU Council presidency.

“In preliminary discussions we are now having in Council, we also discussed this issue, especially the issue of wood-based products,” he added.

Discussion between environment ministers on the forest strategy is likely to focus on the balance between different uses of forests, an EU diplomatic source told EURACTIV. One of the main concerns is that tightening environmental rules in Europe could see more imports of wood that does not meet similar standards, thereby increasing the risk of imported deforestation.

Continued on Page 5
EU countries already raised concern that there is too much focus on environmental protection without sufficient consideration of the socio-economic aspects of forestry during preparatory meetings at ambassador level.

Now the item is on the agenda of environment ministers who are meeting in Luxembourg on Wednesday (6 October) to discuss the EU’s position for the upcoming UN climate summit in Glasgow and the European Commission’s ‘Fit for 55’ package of legislation on energy and climate change.

On Tuesday, several EU ministers will hold preparatory talks in Austria in order to coordinate their views on forestry at the Environment Council taking place in Luxembourg the following day, EURACTIV understands.

EU MEMBER STATES UNCONVINCED

The European Commission’s proposed forest strategy, tabled in July, includes ideas that were well-received, like protecting old-growth forests and a commitment to plant three billion trees by 2030.

But, beyond that, it has been criticised by EU member states, industry and MEPs from across the political spectrum for being vague and overstepping into national competences when it comes to forest management.

A central criticism is that the proposal overlooks the economic value of forests and places too much focus on environmental aspects. EU countries also feel they were shunned from the process and now face an EU strategy that implies decisions that should belong to national governments.

“I think member states are fairly united on this. They want to be involved more,” one EU diplomat said. “This forest strategy was prepared differently to the earlier ones. In earlier ones, member states were very much involved in developing the strategy. Now we just saw the final strategy,” the source added.

While EU countries have little power to change the text of the strategy, they can push back on the legislation that is being put forward in order to fulfil its goals.

“In the implementation, it is important that the member states are very much involved because the forest side is [the competency of] the member states, not Brussels,” an EU diplomatic source told EURACTIV.

The Commission’s attempt to limit the use of forests – ignoring the other uses of forests – is “embarrassing”, he said at an event organised by the Confederation of European Paper Industries (Cepi) and the Finnish Forest Industries Federation (FFIF).

Jori Ringman, the director general of Cepi, highlighted that one in five manufacturing companies in Europe are in the forestry sector, employing 3.5 million people overall.

“As key players in the forest-based value chain, we regret that the EU strategy focuses too much on the sink function of the forest – it’s important, but it’s not the only important thing. It simply misses the holistic, large-scale contribution that wood-based products can bring to a greener and more circular economy.”

“We must keep fossils in the ground,” he added.

When used in construction material, wood replaces heavily-polluting materials like cement and can store carbon for centuries, said Nils Torvalds, a Finnish MEP.

“Forest products can also be used as alternative fuels for airplanes, to diminish their carbon footprint,” he told EURACTIV in an interview.

Finish Forest Industries Federation. However, those that are cut need to be replaced in order to ensure a renewal of the stock while forming a closed carbon cycle.

For the forestry industry, the European Commission strategy places too much emphasis on the global warming mitigation role of forests and their capacity to act as “carbon sinks” – absorbing more carbon dioxide than they emit.

This overlooks the ability of forest biomass to replace fossil fuels in transport or provide sustainable wood-based alternatives to cement in the construction sector, the industry argues.

Biomass cannot replace fossil fuels if trees remain standing, said Timo Jaatinen Director General, Finish Forest Industries Federation. However, those that are cut need to be replaced in order to ensure a renewal of the stock while forming a closed carbon cycle.

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Finnish MEP: ‘I’m against the power creep in the EU’s forest strategy’

By Frédéric Simon | EURACTIV.com

There is no such thing as a European forest, and those trying to introduce an EU-wide forest strategy that does not take account of regional differences “live in fantasyland,” Finnish lawmaker Nils Torvalds told EURACTIV.

Nils Torvalds is a member of the centrist Renew Europe group in the European Parliament. He spoke to EURACTIV’s Frédéric Simon ahead of an event organised on 28 September by the European paper industry association (Cepi) and the Finnish Forest Industries Federation (FFIF).

The European Commission presented an EU forest strategy in July. What would you say are the positives and negatives of that policy document?

There was, I think, a lot of misunderstandings in the very beginning of the process. Pressure was exerted on the European Commission to get decisions made in a way that is not in conformity with the treaty.

And there is now a risk of competence creep, where the European Commission and also the European Parliament, in small steps, infringe on the rights of the member states. That would be contrary to Article 5 of the Treaty on the European Union, which describes the rights of the Union and the rights of the member states.

And that’s the issue we have with the Commission’s proposal for the forest strategy.

Continued on Page 7
Continued from Page 6

I had a discussion with [Environment Commissioner] Virginijus Sinkevičius before the forest strategy was published, where he said he doesn’t like clear cuttings but has no power to ban it. That was sort of an acknowledgment that the real power on forestry is in the hands of the member states.

And now there is this EU forest strategy that is trying to enlarge the rights of the European Union – it complicates the issue and it’s against the Treaty.

The counter-argument is that forests act as “carbon sinks”, which the European Commission considers as a crucial part of the EU’s climate strategy. Do you recognise that, indeed, there is a big role for the forestry sector in meeting the EU’s climate targets?

Yes, but at the same time, if you read Article 4 and 5 of the Treaty, it clearly states that the measures taken by the Union should be proportionate and that the Union should do as little as possible. That’s the meaning of the treaty. Because this is not a Federation.

Therefore, I don’t really accept the argument that we should overstep what’s in the Treaty. We should first try to find other solutions.

And those solutions have to be proportionate, meaning that the Union has a right to say where we should be aiming on a very general level. But the decision of what to do should be left to the member states.

Take biodiversity for example – it diverges radically from one country to the other. Those measures need to be defined by the member states. And that’s the principle of proportionality.

I’m against the power creep in the Commission’s forestry proposal.

What do you think can be the added value of a forestry strategy at the European level? Do you see any positives in the Commission’s proposal?

First, we would need to define what would be the added value. A French forest, for instance, looks very different from a Finnish forest and there is no one measure that can be taken on a Union level that would fit both.

In France, forests are biologically much older than the Finnish boreal forest, which started developing after the Ice Age 10,000 years ago. France did not have an Ice Age, and the forest there is probably 100 times older than the Finnish forest, which means that the biodiversity is much more complicated and less general than in the Finnish forest.

Therefore, there is no single measure that can suit a French and a Finnish forest at the same time.

So you believe there’s no added value to a European forest strategy?

There is no such thing as a European forest. There are different forests – which might be Spanish, Greek, German, etc. And if you don’t acknowledge that there are different forests, then you are living in Fantasyland.

One of the aims of the Commission’s forest strategy is to protect so-called primary and old-growth forests. Do you support that objective? And what do you think should be the definition of old-growth, because this can vary from one country to the next?

Probably there is no such thing as a primary forest in countries like The Netherlands. So again, if you’re speaking in general terms about the primary forest, then you are not addressing the real issue.

Now, if you express worries about the primary forest in Finland, then we’re on the same page. The primary boreal forest extends roughly from Sweden to the Ural Mountains in Russia. And the primary forest there is abundant, very abundant actually.

But if you look at the primary forest in Central Europe, most of it was probably destroyed during the 30 Years War in the 1500s, and again during the First World War and the Second World War.

So again, any discussion on this needs to be based on facts, not ideology. And as a former journalist, I do expect reporters to have basic knowledge about the different forms of forests and to know what the primary forest is in the different member states. And that’s not the case in this discussion. What I hear very often from my former journalist colleagues are ideological concepts that are not based on the facts. And I don’t like that ideological approach.

Well, there are policy proposals put forward by the European Commission. And your job eventually as a Member of the European Parliament will be to vote on those proposals...

That’s not correct: I’m going to vote on what we have changed from the Commission’s proposal.

Oh, so let me ask you: one of the ideas contained in the Commission’s forest strategy is to promote ‘Carbon Farming’, where forest owners can
be remunerated for initiatives that restore the ability of forests and soils to store carbon dioxide. There is something similar in the so-called LULUCF regulation, which aims to grow European carbon sinks from the forests. Do you agree at all with this idea? And if so, what do you think should be the underlying principles to guide such a policy?

Let’s go back again to the facts. Carbon farming was a pilot project proposed by the European Parliament, and actually by me – myself – four or five years ago. The pilot project in southwestern Finland aimed at measuring what carbon farming could produce in sequestering carbon on a farm. And I’m perfectly okay with that.

So yes, I’m a big enthusiast of carbon farming. But again, we need to find out how much the different meadows, fields and soils can do when it comes to carbon sequestration. And there, I still lack some information from the Commission.

The Commission has not yet tabled detailed proposals for this, so what do you think should be the principles underpinning any EU proposal on carbon farming?

First is to measure exactly how much carbon can be sequestered. Then, decide how much would be paid for each ton of carbon sequestered. But we can’t have that as long as we don’t have the figure on the amount of carbon that can be sequestered.

And that depends on the circumstances. In northern Finland, for instance, there is nearly 24h of daylight in the summertime. And that allows a fair amount of carbon sequestration from forests. In areas with shorter daylight time, you probably have a lower amount of carbon sequestration.

So we have to find something which is even-handed for the different Member States, which might be slightly complicated.

But I think this is interesting, and we should try to find a solution for carbon sequestration, which functions as a sort of complement to the ETS.

The Commission is preparing a proposal to certify carbon removals from forestry, agriculture or technological solutions like direct air capture. Is that something you would support as an MEP?

Yes. But again, there are different circumstances. Taking carbon capture and storage for instance, there might be a big difference between natural solutions like forestry and technological solutions, like CCS. So I think the Commission has a lot of work to do to find something which is doable.

Coming back to forestry, wood products actually store carbon dioxide and can also act as a substitute for fossil fuels. Is that function of forests sufficiently recognised in your view?

In the last mandate, we spoke a lot about LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry) and HWP (harvested wood products). At that time, the question of harvesting wood for construction came up. In buildings, the carbon can be stored for 100, 200 years or even 600 years if you consider Norwegian churches.

With new technologies, you can use wood fibres to replace cotton, there are two or three pilot projects in Finland on that. Cotton uses a lot of water, it caused the depletion of the Aral Sea. So replacing that with wood fibres could be a good solution for the future. Forest products can also be used as alternative fuels for airplanes, to diminish their carbon footprint.

And again, we have to find a balance where we use the forest resources in a responsible way. And that goes back to proportionality: the Union should spell out the objectives and leave the member states to decide how to meet them.
The new Forest Strategy is an important piece of the European Commission architecture to deliver on the European Green Deal together with the Fit for 55 package. Everybody agrees that forests play a key role in combating climate change together with wood-based products. However, the strategy remains contradictory. It seeks to reconcile the climate benefits of wood-based products with the forests’ other economic uses, forest protection and forest role as carbon sinks. It highlights the climate benefits of wood-based products, but at the same time attempts to limit forest use. Similarly, the Fit for 55 package of legislative proposals does not adequately recognise the solutions provided by the forest industry to curb climate change.

If Member State’s power to decide over forest policy is not acknowledged more clearly in the strategy, there is a continued threat that some pieces of forest decision-making would escape Member States. When implementing the strategy, the diversity of Europe’s forests must be kept in mind:

Continued on Page 10
Portuguese cork forests cannot be compared to the coniferous forests in Finland. The methods used for the management and treatment of forests also vary. Diversity should be respected and appreciated instead of pushing a one-size fits all approach.

As key players in the forest-based value chain, we regret that the strategy focuses much on the sink function of forests and simply misses the holistic contribution that wood-based products can bring to a greener and more circular economy: to keep fossils in the ground!

We should also remember that the extended forest-based value chain supports 4 million jobs in the green economy. Again, regional variation within EU is large.

The European forests and the forest-based sector provide integrated solutions to the global climate challenge on a very large scale. At the same time, European forest-based sector helps the EU to reach the targets set in the Green Deal. Together with the product substitution effect, the overall positive climate effect is estimated at 20% of all fossil emissions in the European Union. And there is a plenty of potential that remains untapped with the proposed Forest Strategy."

In addition, some sectors depending on fossils will now have free allocation, a carbon border measure and an earmarked sink in the forests that these sectors have nothing to do with. The EU climate policy can’t expect European forests and their sink, to compensate for certain “difficult-to-decarbonise” sectors such as steel or chemicals, it would be counterproductive, inefficient and far from fair.

The European forest-based industry is ready to help make the European Commission three billion trees initiative a success for the long-term sustainable growth of forests. We believe this is the right policy, forests need to be grown more, rather than their use limited. We need more forests in Europe but protecting our forests with a short-term tree-planting exercise or converting them into nature restoration areas will not be sufficient to reach our climate objectives.

Although the world as we knew it came to a halt during the pandemic, we can’t slow down our climate mitigation efforts, the climate can’t wait!

As Forest-based industry, we have a strategic interest in keeping healthy and growing forests in Europe.

Harvesting in the EU is still much less than the annual growth and growing stock is increasing every year. Thereby harvesting can be increased alongside with fostered sustainable management of forests which ensure the long-term vitality of the resource, maintenance of biodiversity and supports the achievement of climate neutrality by 2050.

Forests are not threatened by sustainable forest-based bioeconomy but by the other sectors. And most of all: by climate change. The more fossil material we take from underground, the harder the adaptation will become for forests – shaking the foundations of the policy.

Sustainable and timely forest management, extending the area of forests and increasingly diverse wood-based solutions together should be at the core of Europe’s green growth.