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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Council
Subject:	Informal meeting of Forest Ministers of the „For Forest Group“ (Vienna and Stuhleck, Austria, 25-26 September 2023) <i>- Information from the Austrian delegation, on behalf of the Austrian, Finnish, Slovenian and Swedish delegations</i>

Delegations will find in the Annex a note from the Austrian delegation, on behalf of the Austrian, Finnish, Slovenian and Swedish delegations, on the above-mentioned subject which will be dealt with under ‘Any other business’ at the Council meeting (‘Agriculture and Fisheries’) on 20 November 2023.

**Informal meeting of Forest Ministers of the „For Forest Group“ (Vienna and Stuhleck,
Austria, 25-26 September 2023)**

*Information from the Austrian delegation, on behalf of the Austrian, Finnish, Slovenian and
Swedish delegations*

On September 25-26 2023, the *For Forest Group*, comprising the Ministers responsible for forestry of Austria, Finland, Slovenia and Sweden, gathered in Austria for their informal ministerial meeting. The Group was founded in 2022, through the initiative of Ministers of forest rich EU Member States as an informal strategic group, aiming for closer cross-border cooperation in forest related matters, based on sustainable forest management as way forward, including exchange of knowledge and best practices.

At the ministerial meeting in Stuhleck (Austria), which took place on the side-lines of the AUSTROFOMA, Austria's largest and internationally renowned forestry machinery and trade fair, the *For Forest Group* presented a Joint Statement, titled "Shaping the future of European forests and the forest based sector – leading the way forward."

In the Joint Statement, the Ministers reaffirmed their guiding principles for forest related matters in the EU. It highlights the key role of sustainable forest management in securing the multiple functions of forests and making them fit for current and future challenges. Moreover, the guiding principle for any action should remain the three dimensions of sustainability – including ecologic, economic and social aspects. The *For Forest Group* also reiterated the importance of bioeconomy, driven by the sustainable use of forest-based products, as a crucial tool in generating income and rural jobs, in supporting the sustainable energy transition as well as in promoting innovation along the wood-based value chain.

Furthermore, the importance of the economic dimension of the European forest based sector was underpinned by a study¹ that assessed the relevance of forestry and the timber industry in 30 European countries, including the EU27, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The study concludes that the total gross value added linked to the European forestry and wood industry, has far been underestimated and amounts to some 1.1 trillion euro, securing around 17.5 million jobs across Europe. Every 16th euro in Europe is generated directly or indirectly by the sector and every 16th job depends on it.

Another key element of the Joint Statement referred to the respect of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Concerning the natural regional and policy differences in forests, it is increasingly important to address and reflect only upon those forest related issues that cannot be adequately addressed at national level, while respecting member state's competences in forest policy

For the future EU policies affecting forests, the *For Forest Group* underlines further the need for assessing the multiple impacts of the Green Deal on the forest-based sector, prior to any new binding and potentially costly legislation. Coherence between different forest related EU policies should be ensured, and fragmentation should be avoided Finally, the socio-economic and ownership structures in the EU Member States should be adequately taken into account.

The *For Forest Group* is keen on sharing its Joint Statement with all other delegations and encourages close collaboration on forest policy issues to promote sustainable forest management practices and the development of the operating environment of forest-based bioeconomy.

¹ Econmove (2023): The Economic Impact of the Forestry and Wood Industry in Europe in terms of the Bioeconomy [https://info.bml.gv.at/dam/jcr:448f6fa9-2de2-4cfe-9b66-ef71ab0df1db/Studie_%20Die%20%C3%B6konomische%20Bedeutung%20der%20europ%C3%A4ischen%20Forst-%20und%20Holzwirtschaft%20im%20Sinne%20der%20Bio%C3%B6konomie%20\(EN\).pdf](https://info.bml.gv.at/dam/jcr:448f6fa9-2de2-4cfe-9b66-ef71ab0df1db/Studie_%20Die%20%C3%B6konomische%20Bedeutung%20der%20europ%C3%A4ischen%20Forst-%20und%20Holzwirtschaft%20im%20Sinne%20der%20Bio%C3%B6konomie%20(EN).pdf)