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COMMUNICATION

WRITTEN PROCEDURE

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Subject: Draft Council Conclusions on the post-2020 EU Forest Strategy
- *End of written procedure*
- *Statement from Belgium*

Delegations are informed that the written procedure initiated by CM 4473/20 was **completed successfully on 10 November 2020**.

The outcome of the written procedure is that all delegations agreed to the approval of the Council conclusions on *Perspectives for the EU forest-related policies and EU forest strategy post 2020*, as set out in document 12370/20. Therefore, the Council Conclusions are approved.

The Presidency and the General Secretariat of the Council take this opportunity to thank all delegations for their cooperation.

Conclusions on the EU post-2020 Forest Strategy**Statement from the Belgian delegation**

BELGIUM supports the political signal that members states send with these Council Conclusions agreeing on the need for a new approach towards a balanced and strengthened post 2020 EU Forest Strategy with clear focus and proposals for urgent and ambitious action.

Challenges we have ahead are many and complex and BELGIUM is of the opinion that this new approach should build on solid partnerships based on mutual trust between all concerned parties and stakeholders within Member States, with Member States and the European Commission as key players.

BELGIUM agrees with the conclusions as they stand, but would like to express its regret about the wording in paragraph 6(g). Paragraph 6(g) of the Council Conclusions entails an ambiguous view on the status of forest policies in the EU and illustrates in addition a defensive way of thinking. Although this or similar formulations are mentioned in nearly every Council Conclusions on the EU forest strategy since 1998, BELGIUM believes it is now time to leave this discussion behind us. Although an identical para is in the adopted Council Conclusions of April 2019 (see its para 2) and other previous Council Conclusions, BELGIUM feels that it would be a step forward and could illustrate that within the EU there is a shared interest in such a partnership, working together on forest policies in an integrated manner and dealing with several challenges ahead in a more coordinated and coherent way. BELGIUM feels that this step is needed in order to send a clear political signal to express the willingness - with no ambiguity what so ever - to build a good basis to enhance coordination and coherence and take the most effective and appropriate actions at EU level for the challenges ahead as expressed in this set of Council Conclusions as well as in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Farm to Fork Strategy. BELGIUM is of the opinion that reiterating this paragraph illustrates a defensive position whereas BELGIUM feels that a more proactive and open attitude towards actions on EU level concerning forests would be more appropriate when positioning for the challenges ahead. We know how sensitive and principal this issue is, but assess that the issue on forest competences in the EU deserves a more nuanced view.

Indeed, the statement in paragraph 6(g) is, to say the least, quite misleading or expresses a one-sided view. It is not valid to argue that forests are an exclusive competence of the Member States, reasoning that forests are not explicitly included in the treaty as an EU exclusive competence or shared competence. Forests, just like air, water, waste, etc ... can be, and is subject of EU policies from different angles, like rural development, (international) trade, biodiversity, economic development - to name only a few - which are included in the Treaty. This more balanced insight could give a new strength and legitimacy in further building the new partnership we call for in order to maintain, protect, restore and sustainably manage and use the European forests and enhance sustainability of the whole forest sector for a better good for society and biodiversity in Europe.
