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From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Council

Subject: Information from the Austrian delegation on behalf of the Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Croatian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish and Slovak delegations - Challenges and priorities in preparation of the EU Forest Strategy post-2020

Delegations will find in Annex an information note from the AT delegation on the above mentioned subject to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the meeting of the Council ("Agriculture and Fisheries") on 22-23 March 2021.

Information from the Austrian delegation on behalf of the Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Croatian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish and Slovak delegations

Challenges and priorities in preparation of the EU Forest Strategy post-2020

EU Forests and sustainable forest management will make an important contribution for meeting the objectives of the European Green Deal, notably in supporting the transition towards climate neutrality and fostering sustainable growth through the use of renewable raw materials to substitute fossil materials and fuels.

However, we are very much concerned about the way different initiatives under the EU Green Deal address forest related aspects, thus predetermining the scope of the upcoming EU Forest Strategy post-2020.

While welcoming the plans for an EU Forest Strategy post-2020, it has to be ensured that it remains the main framework for a coherent and balanced approach towards European forests and their multiple functions.

However, we do not see the multiple functions of forests and the role of sustainable forest management sufficiently reflected in the overall approach as well as by specific proposals of the Commission, leading to imbalances within the three pillars of sustainability.

A narrowed focus, exclusively on increasing carbon sequestration and aspects related to biodiversity conservation and restoration in the short term, while failing to recognize other forest functions and the importance of active and well-established sustainable forest management capable of enhancing resilience (fire, pests and diseases) in the long term, is deemed inappropriate. In addition, the Commission seems to gradually disregard the variety of European forests, the practical aspects of forest management as well as the complexity of ownership rights across the EU. The current participatory processes are therefore essential to achieve the holistic approach necessary. Vague concepts and criteria have to be avoided at EU level; partly new aspects such as *closer-to-nature forestry*, *old-growth forests*, or *strict protection* have to be clear and practicable while at the same time allowing national authorities to decide on these matters on a case-by-case basis in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

The supporting Member States reiterate that all relevant initiatives at EU level related to forests shall build upon the definition and criteria of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), agreed upon by the EU and its Member States and other European countries in the framework of Forest Europe by the Helsinki H1 Resolution¹.

Furthermore, we underline the role of the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC) as the most relevant body to assist the European Commission in the preparation of the future EU Forest Strategy. We therefore highly recommend that a working group under the SFC will be set up accordingly (as it was the case for the current strategy) in order to support the Commission in its work on this essential file. This would be equally in line with the Council Conclusions on the EU Forest Strategy post-2020, which asked for a balanced and strengthened post-2020 EU Forest Strategy, developed together with EU Member States and stakeholders, supporting and complementing forest policy at national level.

We urge the Commission to respect the Council Conclusions on the EU Forest Strategy post-2020 that also give the political guidance for protecting forests and enhancing their resilience and ecosystem services while at the same time ensuring the competitiveness and sustainability of the EU's forest-based Industry.

Finally, we reiterate that the responsibility for forests lies within the Member States and that all forest-related initiatives at EU-level must respect the principle of subsidiarity and Member States' competence in this field.

¹ https://www.foresteurope.org/docs/MC/MC_helsinki_resolutionH1.pdf