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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject: Communication on the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030
– *Policy debate*

Delegations will find in Annex a background note from the Presidency for the policy debate on the above-mentioned subject at the Council ("Agriculture and Fisheries") meeting on 11-12 October 2021.

Council meeting of Agriculture Ministers

11-12 October 2021

– Policy debate –

New EU forest strategy for 2030

Presidency background paper with questions for ministers

Forests play an increasingly important role for our wellbeing and the health of the planet. They have become an essential part of our efforts to tackle climate change, to preserve our biodiversity and at the same time to encourage sustainable economic development.

The previous EU forest strategy, which expired in 2020, underwent a mid-term review in 2018. The **Council conclusions on the progress on the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and on a new strategic framework for forests**¹ welcomed the progress made towards the promotion of sustainable development through sustainable forest management and called for reflection on a new EU Forest Strategy post 2020, considering the need for a more integrated approach to continue addressing the environmental, social, and economic opportunities and challenges, while also considering the relevant policy developments at Member State, EU and international levels.

The **European Green Deal** (EGD)² recognises forestry and the sustainable management of forests as one of the key policies and measures to tackle climate and environmental-related challenges. The EGD emphasises that forest ecosystems are under increasing pressure and that the EU's forested area must improve, both in quality and quantity, if the EU is to achieve climate neutrality and retain a healthy environment. Sustainable reforestation and afforestation and the restoration of degraded forests can increase the absorption of CO₂ while improving the resilience of forests and promoting the circular bio-economy.

¹ ST 8609/19.

² COM(2019) 640.

The **EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 – bringing nature back into our lives**³ addresses the need to increase the quantity of forests and improve their health and resilience, and recognises the importance of forests for biodiversity, climate and water regulation, the provision of food, medicines and materials, carbon sequestration and storage, soil stabilisation and the purification of air and water. It also points out that resilient forests can support a resilient economy and that forests play an important role in providing materials, products and services, which are key for the circular bio-economy.

In its **conclusions on perspectives for the EU’s forest-related policies and EU forest strategy post 2020**⁴, the Council called on the Commission to ensure the consistency and coherence of EU forest-related policies after 2020, stressing the need to strategically address the increasing fragmentation of such policies and improve their coordination and coherence, in particular in view of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the EU Adaptation Strategy and EU climate legislation, among others. It also recognised the importance of further promoting sustainable forest management globally.

In its **conclusions on biodiversity - the need for urgent action**⁵, the Council stressed the need for effective action in all policy sectors relevant to biodiversity, including forestry and the sustainable management of forests. The Council also stressed the importance of healthy and resilient forest ecosystems which fulfil multiple functions, and welcomed the ongoing participatory processes on the protection of remaining primary forests, including the defining, mapping, and monitoring of primary and old-growth forests, in order to ensure their conservation.

In its **conclusions on forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU strategy on adaptation to climate change**⁶, the Council recognised the importance of further integrating adaptation measures into sustainable forest management as an example of a nature-based solution, highlighting the multifunctional role of forests, in particular in stabilising and cooling local climates, regulating hydrological cycles and contributing positively to the carbon cycle.

³ COM(2020) 380.

⁴ ST 12695/20.

⁵ ST 12210/20.

⁶ ST 9694/21.

In July 2021, the Commission adopted a **new EU forest strategy for 2030**⁷ (the Strategy) that recognises the central and multifunctional role of forests and the contribution of foresters and the entire forest-based value chain. The Strategy sets out a policy framework for delivering growing, healthy, diverse and resilient EU forests which contribute significantly to biodiversity ambition, secure livelihoods in rural areas and beyond, and support a sustainable forest bio-economy that relies on the most sustainable forest management practices. It mentions that a common understanding of sustainable forest management was agreed on in the Pan-European Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests ('Forest Europe').

The Strategy aims to **support the socio-economic functions of forests**, as forests and the forest-based sector provide many such functions and benefits, including additional jobs and growth opportunities in rural areas. Forests and income from forest-based products play an important role in keeping rural areas vibrant and support their economic development. The Strategy acknowledges that sustainable raw wood and non-wood materials and products are key to the EU's transition to a sustainable climate-neutral economy, and in this regard aims to boost the entire sustainable forest bio-economy that works in synergy with the EU's increased climate and biodiversity ambition. In this respect, the Strategy envisages measures to promote a sustainable forest bio-economy for long-lasting wood products, ensuring the sustainable use of wood-based resources for bioenergy, promoting the non-wood forest-based bio-economy, including ecotourism, and developing skills and empowering people for a sustainable forest-based bio-economy.

The Strategy includes measures to **protect, restore and enlarge EU forests** in order to combat climate change, reverse biodiversity loss and ensure resilient and multifunctional forest ecosystems. It also includes measures to protect the EU's last remaining primary and old-growth forests, to ensure forest restoration and sustainable forest management for climate adaptation and forest resilience, and to reforest and afforest biodiverse forests, including by planting 3 billion additional trees by 2030. The Strategy also recognises the need for financial incentives and seeks to develop, among other things, financial incentives for private forest owners and managers to provide these ecosystem services. Furthermore, the Strategy recognises the need for strategic forest planning in all EU Member States at national and, where applicable, regional level. This planning should be based on reliable monitoring and data, transparent governance and coordinated exchanges at EU level.

⁷ COM(2021) 572.

The Commission is planning a new **legislative proposal on forest observation, reporting and data collection** with a view to establishing an EU-wide integrated forest monitoring framework, using remote sensing technologies and geospatial data integrated with ground-based monitoring, which will improve the accuracy of monitoring.

The role of **research and innovation** is emphasised in the Strategy, as well as opportunities to accelerate the application of digital innovations to forestry, rural areas and across value chains, and accelerate the uptake of forest-related innovations, to promote knowledge exchange, cooperation, education and training.

The Strategy also focuses on **implementing an inclusive and coherent EU forest governance framework**, aiming to consistently involve Member States' experts in all forest related activities at an early stage, and on strengthening the implementation and enforcement of existing EU acquis.

The Strategy is accompanied by two Commission staff working documents: the staff working document on the stakeholder consultation and evidence base, and the staff working document on the 3 billion tree planting pledge for 2030.

Suggested questions for the exchange of views at the Council meeting of Agriculture Ministers on 11-12 October 2021:

- 1. In your opinion, how can we achieve a balance between the three pillars of forest sustainability (environmental, economic and social) at different levels, i.e. globally, at EU level and nationally?*
- 2. What is your opinion on the envisaged legislative proposal on EU forest observation, reporting and data collection?*
- 3. What are your views on the additional indicators, thresholds or ranges for sustainable forest management envisaged by the Strategy?*