

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the commitment of the European Commission to stepping up efforts to protect and restore the world's forests; notes with regret the limited scope of the proposals put forward;
2. acknowledges the European Union's efforts over the last decades to increase forest cover, including through extended afforestation programmes, as well as thanks to strict Member States' forest legislations which ensures reforestation and natural regrowth; is concerned, however, about the alarming rate of global forest degradation, notably of primary forests, which includes both pristine and managed forests ⁽¹⁾;
3. stresses the importance of primary forests as biodiversity hot spots which provide ecosystem services contributing to human health (pharmaceutical use, nutrition, medicinal plants), social inclusion (mental health, promoting employment in rural areas, eco-tourism, etc.), as well as their key role in preserving the environment from desertification, flooding, degradation of hydrogeological structure, soil erosion, extreme weather, loss of rainfall, polluted air, etc.; also recognises that sustainably managed, man-grown as well as mature native forests contribute to the protection and conservation of biodiversity;
4. recognises that deforestation is a very complex phenomenon with multiple drivers, increasing demands from a growing global population for food, feed, bioenergy, timber and other commodities being the main ones; stresses that deforestation is the second largest source of anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and a major driver of biodiversity loss ⁽²⁾;
5. stresses that preventing forest loss can have multiple benefits for people and ecosystems including biodiversity conservation, GHG emissions reduction by carbon absorption — one of the most effective climate change mitigation measures — provision of ecosystems services that can drive sustainable growth, and a new forestry bioeconomy based on rational and sustainable exploitation of resources;
6. calls on the Commission and the Member States to put forward regulatory measures and recommendations tailored to meet national, regional and local specific divergences, to effectively combat all forms of deforestation and degradation of the original forest ecosystems which provide carbon stock and biodiversity, while also providing the appropriate funding;
7. underlines that the restoration of forests, in particular in Europe's most deforested regions, remains among the most effective strategies for climate change adaptation and mitigation; in this respect, the expansion of agroforestry systems, by planting trees on and around cropland and pastures, could play an increasingly important role;

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.cbd.int/forest/definitions.shtml>

⁽²⁾ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378018314365#fig0005>

8. calls for policy coherence to align the efforts, objectives and outcomes produced by the different policies, including the new CAP (Common Agricultural Policy), the EU's international commitments, i.e. the European Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, its trade policy and the European Green Deal, in a comprehensive sustainability strategy with clear objectives and implementation measures and with due regard to a social, economic and environmental balance;

Priority 1: Reduce the EU consumption footprint on land and guarantee the consumption of products from deforestation-free supply chains in the EU

9. stresses that the EU shall guarantee consumption of products from non-EU deforestation-free supply chains as a central point in the process of protecting and restoring the world's forests; calls on the EU to include consumers at the heart of the process to influence markets relying on the problematic conversion of primary forests to produce widely used products such as coffee, cocoa, palm oil and livestock;

10. draws attention to severe human rights violations and environmental destruction in different product supply chains (e.g. soybean, palm oil, sugar, cocoa, beef, raw material for biofuels) and underlines that voluntary initiatives by the private sector and financial industry have so far not been sufficient to halt and reverse global deforestation; therefore calls on the Commission to make compliance with environmental and Human Rights (HRDD) Due Diligence (?) standards mandatory;

11. points out that forest fires represent the main threat to the conservation of forest ecosystems in many EU Member States and regions. Facilitating local and regional authorities to further enhance their resilience to disasters is crucial considering that they are the first responders. Containing disasters by local community actions is the fastest and most effective way of limiting damage caused by forest fires;

12. calls on the Commission to take a variety of actions to incentivise the active involvement of consumers in the selection, promotion and use of more sustainable goods, including, but not limited to, the establishment of specific EU certification schemes for deforestation-free products, integrating the certification scheme already available for forest-based products including both Forest Management and Chain of Custody⁽⁴⁾ into a more comprehensive assessment, also applicable to non-forest-based products, encompassing: sustainable forest management; forest management and production systems based on reduced use of natural resources (e.g. water), chemical substances (e.g. pesticides) and energy (fossil fuels and energy from non-renewable sources in general); deforestation-free aspects in producing non-forest-based products; promotion of products with a limited transport footprint (e.g. area brand, carbon footprint); and lifecycle assessments (LCA) of products to quantify their environmental impact and to allow the comparison of their environmental performance;

13. calls upon the Commission to step up its efforts in the fight against illegal logging through the full and effective implementation of the EU FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) work plan 2018-2022, in particular by strengthening the implementation of the EU Timber Regulation;

14. calls upon the Commission to improve the communication and promotion of products from sustainable forestry towards customers by developing a specific label indicating the deforestation rate of a product and improving/integrating the already available European database/information systems (e.g. Ecolabel database) with deforestation-free products which shall be easy to recognise;

15. calls upon the Commission to institute procedures to check the accuracy of the information and assessments collected in the European information system in order to improve confidence in the information provided, including strong traceability requirements guaranteeing the origin of products, and stronger monitoring and enforcement systems in order to help prevent fraud and mislabelling of products; suggests the consideration of other sourcing policies, particularly in

(?) Human Rights Due Diligence HRDD is generally understood as a means by which companies can identify, prevent, mitigate and account for the negative human rights impacts of their activities or those linked to their business relationships. <https://corporatejustice.org/priorities/13-human-rights-due-diligence>

(4) e.g. Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®), Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification TM (PEFCTM), etc.

countries with a high rate of deforestation and low certification coverage and/or a high rate of illegal logging, e.g. an obligation to provide proof that products were sourced sustainably, including documentation of material trades between operators and information on the procurement policies of all parties in the supply chain;

16. urges all EU institutions and agencies to lead by example by modifying their behaviour, procurements and framework contracts towards the use of products from sustainable forestry; invites, moreover, its staff and members to offset carbon emissions linked to their CoR related flights by financially supporting sustainable forestry projects;

17. stresses that public procurement, accounting for around 14 % of GDP in the EU, offers a potentially strong lever for ensuring more sustainable product supply contracts to purchase work, goods or services from companies. To this end, the introduction, within Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement, of a ban on public purchases of products resulting from deforestation can produce relevant positive impacts on the promotion of deforestation-free products;

18. points out that promoting a shift of consumer behaviour towards more healthy plant-based diets with a high intake of fruit and vegetables (which should be deforestation-free certified), thus reducing global meat consumption, can promote and preserve the health of citizens and of the planet in line with the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration⁽⁵⁾; this shift must reflect the recommendations of the Farm to Fork Strategy which fosters consumption that is, as far as possible, local and sustainable in terms of the environment and human health;

19. encourages the Commission to find synergies and connections with ongoing projects and initiatives related to the creation of urban or peri-urban forests and ecological corridors at subnational, national and European level and outside Europe; points out that these initiatives have many environmental and social benefits (ecosystem services) for people living in the connected cities, encompassing clean air, water flow regulation, soil protection from water and wind erosion, restoration of degraded land, resilience to disasters and to climate change, lower summer daytime temperatures, provision of food, higher urban biodiversity, better physical and mental health, higher property values, etc.;

20. calls for the involvement of European citizens and local and regional authorities, commercial players and stakeholders that sell their products on the European market (e.g. multinational companies) in these activities; points out their role in protecting the forests and the need to increase transparency in their corporate reporting on social and environmental responsibilities (in line with Directive 2014/95/EU);

Priority 2: Work in partnership with producing countries to reduce pressures on forests and to 'deforest-proof' EU development cooperation and Priority 3: Strengthen international cooperation to halt deforestation and forest degradation and encourage forest restoration

21. draws attention to the fact that deforestation mostly happens in non-EU countries. Most of the timber produced in these countries is consumed locally, and yet the uptake of timber certification remains low, as the cost of obtaining certification is too high, particularly for smallholders, who are also competing with cheaper conventional or even illegally harvested timber. Similarly, specific attention needs to be paid to how to certify forest-based products, such as natural rubber, produced by a large number of smallholders;

22. calls for improving environmental education in developing countries where primary forests are located as a key aspect in raising awareness in these countries of the importance of their own environmental resources; points out that the direct involvement of citizens in these environmental education initiatives could bring many benefits, such as:

(a) greater knowledge about the importance of the ecosystem services that sustainably managed forests and primary forests provide to society;

⁽⁵⁾ Under the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration, cities commit to: align food procurement policies to the Planetary Health Diet ideally sourced from organic agriculture, support an overall increase of healthy plant-based food consumption in our cities by shifting away from unsustainable, unhealthy diets https://www.c40.org/press_releases/good-food-cities

- (b) recognition of the direct and indirect multiple benefits of sustainable forest management (SFM);
- (c) a higher chance of deriving beneficial outcomes from local actions to limit deforestation and forest degradation; more opportunities to transform the protection of natural resources into their sustainable management and thus contributing to green jobs and green growth for the local population, etc.;
23. points out the Commission shall consider the possibility of proposing primary forests as Unesco heritage sites in order to help protect them from deforestation and to increase the chance of drawing public attention to their protection;
24. stresses that together with multifunctionality biodiversity is a key theme to take into consideration when discussing the EU's forestry policy framework; points out that every time deforestation occurs by destroying a primary forest or a mature native forest, there is a loss of biodiversity which is typical for forests and difficult to restore because the area would be highly degraded;
25. welcomes the new EU-wide Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 which raises the level of ambition for the EU to drive actions to halt biodiversity loss and ecosystems degradation across the whole of Europe and positioning the EU as a leader in the world in addressing the global biodiversity crisis, including, e.g. establishing protected areas for at least 30 % of land, introducing legally binding EU nature restoration targets and stricter protection of remaining EU primary and old-growth forests, applying, sustainable management of secondary forests ⁽⁶⁾, restoring degraded ecosystems and land by restoring forests, soils and wetlands and creating green spaces in cities;
26. calls for much stronger efforts to meet the targets related to forestry within the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and to agree on an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity policy framework to be adopted at the upcoming 15th Conference of the Parties at the Convention on Biological Diversity (UN CBD COP 15), also based on the evaluation of the implementation of the strategy to 2020;
27. insists that trade agreements are assessed against the objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and are based on sustainable development; calls for strengthening their chapters on sustainable forest management and the fight against deforestation, and integrate the deforestation into environmental impact assessments. In this regard, as the deforestation in Brazil's Amazon has reached record levels with an 84 percent jump in rainforest fires ⁽⁷⁾, calls on the EU and its Member States to suspend the ratification of the EU-Mercosur until the Brazilian government reverses the trend;
28. calls for an increased contribution of active, adaptive and participatory forestry in the post-2020 EU Forestry Strategy towards maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and thus fully achieving the benefits that biodiversity and ecosystem services can bring. All these activities and efforts should contribute to and promote a more ambitious global biodiversity policy where Europe urges to take responsible leadership;

Priority 4: Redirect finance to support more sustainable land-use practices and Priority 5: Support the availability of, quality of, and access to information on forests and commodity supply chains. Support research and innovation

29. stresses that the measures put in place by the Commission to protect and restore forests in the EU and globally shall be broadly communicated to European citizens in order to increase the support for and effectiveness of these measures;
30. calls upon the Commission to set up a European database collecting ongoing and past projects between the EU and third countries as well as bilateral projects between EU Member States and third countries in order to assess their impact on the world's forests; underlines the involvement of local and regional authorities in the implementation of these projects;

⁽⁶⁾ <https://www.cbd.int/forest/definitions.shtml>

⁽⁷⁾ Brazilian National Institute for Space Research 2019.

31. urges the EU to launch an Industrialisation, Digitisation and Decarbonisation (IDD) strategy to promote wood-based replacement ecomaterials, where consumers are informed of the origin and carbon footprint, and to encourage 'zero-deforestation' certification, boosting its use in sectors such as construction, textiles, chemicals and the packaging industry;
32. calls on the EU to further develop research and monitoring programmes like Copernicus, European Earth Observation and other monitoring programmes to supervise the commodity supply chain in order to be able to identify and give early warnings on products which caused deforestation or environmental degradation during their production phase;
33. calls upon the Commission to consider establishing a European Forestry Agency in light of the importance of protecting and restoring the world's forests.

Brussels, 2 July 2020.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS
