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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: The implementation of the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030
- *Information from the Presidency and the Commission*
- *Exchange of views*

Delegations will find in the annexes the Presidency background paper with questions for ministers and the summary of the workshop *Towards Harmonised Forest Observation, Reporting and Data Collection framework*, with a view to the exchange of views on the above-mentioned subject at the Council ("Agriculture and Fisheries") meeting on 21 November 2022.

Implementation of the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030
Presidency background paper with questions for ministers

Forests and other wooded land cover more than 43.5 % of the EU and are essential for the health and well-being of all Europeans. Forests have long played a vital role in our economy and society, creating jobs and providing food, medicine, materials, clean water and other resources, and are a natural ally in adapting to and combating climate change. While the area of forests has increased in recent decades, climate change is increasingly harming the environmental, economic and social function of forests in the EU, particularly through worsening heat waves, pests, pollution and increasing forest fires.

In response to these challenges, on 16 July 2021, the Commission issued its communication “New EU Forest Strategy for 2030 (COM(2021) 572 final)”, which is another flagship initiative of the European Green Deal and is closely linked to and builds on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

The forest strategy aims to adapt EU forests to the above challenges by increasing forest area, health and resilience. It recognises the central and multifunctional role of forests in tackling biodiversity loss and climate change together with the contribution of forest-based value chains to achieving a sustainable and climate-neutral EU economy by 2050.

The AGRIFISH Council approved conclusions on the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030 at its meeting on 15 November 2021 (ST 13984/21). Council, inter alia, “*invited the Commission to annually report to the Council on the implementation of the new EU Forest Strategy for 2030 and on the recommendations included in these Conclusions*”. As the Council conclusions were approved almost exactly one year ago, the Presidency wishes to discuss at the AGRIFISH Council meeting the progress in the implementation of the Strategy.

Current activities contributing to the implementation of the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030

Several actions of the Strategy are in various stages of preparation and delivery. For example, the Commission Working Group on Forests and Nature continues its work on the guidelines for the identification, mapping and protection of old-growth forests, closer-to-nature forestry, and biodiversity-friendly afforestation and reforestation.

Earlier this year, the European Commission furthermore published a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on nature restoration. One of the target ecosystems of the proposed Nature Restoration Law is forests, with the intention to improve forest biodiversity and resilience. In Article 10, the proposal suggests 6 indicators to monitor the trends in forest ecosystems. In the implementation phase, the Member States will prepare and submit national restoration plans which will outline the delivery of the targets. There will also be provisions for regular monitoring and reporting. The proposal is currently discussed at working party level within the Council Working Party on Environment.

The European Commission has also started preparations for a legislative proposal on „EU Forest Observation, Reporting and Data Collection“. The planned proposal would *“establish 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 framework is expected to deliver relevant forest-related information for a broad portfolio of EU policies related to the environment, climate change as well as the bioeconomy and support an integrated approach to Strategic Plans for Forest in the Member States. The European Commission has set up a sub-working group on ‘Forest Monitoring and Strategic Plans’ as part of the Standing Forestry Committee on 21 September 2022; this subgroup shall advise the European Commission in preparing the proposal.

On the other hand, a lack of progress can be seen on another important issue of the Strategy: An inclusive and coherent EU forest governance framework. The Strategy states that *“Regarding the dialogue with the Member States, building on the extensive experience of and cooperation within the Standing Forestry Committee and the Working Group on Forest and Nature, the Commission will propose an updated governance that brings these two groups together into a single expert group with a mandate reflecting all the environmental, social and economic objectives of the new EU Forest Strategy and membership ensuring that multiple Member State representatives from different Ministries are members of this group. To make this happen and avoid the creation of an additional structure, the Commission will work with Member States to revise the Standing Forestry Committee rules of procedure, or identify other measures as necessary. Also better synergies with the Expert Group on Forest-based Industries and Sector-related Issues will be established.”*

The current political agenda is very rich on forest-related matters, which are dealt with by various Council formations and working parties. Some recent initiatives are even not included in the Strategy. A full picture of current activities contributing to the implementation of the Strategy will be presented by the Commission during the meeting.

Contribution of the Czech Presidency

At its meeting on 7 July, the Council Working Party on Forestry exchanged views on the future of the Standing Forestry Committee. Regardless of the establishment of the Commission sub-working group on forest monitoring and strategic plans, which is certainly positive, Member States are still waiting for the proposal by the Commission for an amendment of Council Decision 89/367/EEC of 29 May 1989 setting up a Standing Forestry Committee, that would significantly facilitate the discussions on EU forest governance framework.

The Czech Presidency organized a workshop “Towards Harmonized Forest Observation, Data Collection and Reporting Framework” (14-16 September 2022, Kutná Hora, Czechia), to start a discussion with the Member States on the envisaged legislation. The summary of the workshop by the Czech Presidency includes manifold recommendations for the European Commission, Member States and other relevant decision-makers that should be used by the recently established Commission sub-working group (see Annex II). The upcoming Swedish Presidency plans to organize a follow-up workshop in early 2023.

Questions for discussion

1. What is your assessment of the progress and how could Member States contribute more efficiently to the implementation of the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030 both at the national and EU level?
2. How could the cooperation between the Commission, Member States and stakeholders on the implementation of the Strategy be further enhanced?
3. What would in your opinion help to overcome the growing fragmentation of forest-related matters at the EU level?

Summary of the workshop

Towards harmonized Forest Observation, Reporting and Data Collection framework

held in Kutná Hora

Czech Republic

from 14th to 16 th of September 2022, prepared by the Czech Presidency

Participants of the workshop:

1. stressed the importance of reliable, verified harmonized or standardized and up-to-date information and communication on the state and development of EU forests, inter-alia for informed both policy- and decision-making at the EU level;
2. reiterated the irreplaceable role of field-collected data for ensuring reliability, accuracy and comprehensiveness of derived information;
3. acknowledged fast development of new and innovative technologies in data acquisition, especially in the area of remote sensing, as well as in their processing;
4. stressed the importance of combining remote sensing and field-collected data for improving information on forests, and the need for mutual and timely exchange of both kinds of data;
5. acknowledged the importance of international processes steered by e.g. FAO, UNECE and Forest Europe for further development of existing sets of forest-related indicators;
6. stressed the importance of relevant tools to communicate information on forests, such as FISE, FRA platform and INForest;
7. welcomed the results of previous efforts on harmonization and evaluation carried out by ENFIN¹, ICP Forests, the scientific community, and others;

¹ European National Forest Inventories Network

8. noted that different types of information on forests serve different purposes, and therefore has to be communicated clearly to safeguard the credibility and coherence of forest information systems;
9. noted the joint efforts towards a harmonized Forest Observation, Reporting and Data Collection framework (Framework);
10. emphasized the role of national and international experts in the interpretation and validation of the results of the Framework.

The participants encouraged the European Commission and other relevant decision makers to:

11. further clarify objectives of the future Framework including forest strategic planning as well as interlinkages with EU policies and legislation;
12. prepare together with the Member States and in consultation with relevant stakeholders the list of indicators to be covered by the Framework based on clear principles, taking into account existing data sources, reporting demands and the cost-effectiveness of the whole process notably within the proposal impact assessment;
13. build on the available knowledge and create further synergies in collecting forest-related data and indicators;
14. promote further harmonization or standardization of forest-related information;
15. support further development of widely available tools for estimating the above-mentioned indicators (see paragraph 12) based on synergistic use of existing field data, remote sensing data relying on an unbiased statistically rigorous inference; in these efforts to respect the legal limitations and ensure the integrity of the national monitoring systems;
16. work together with the Member States to ensure the consistency of forest-related information at national and EU levels to safeguard its credibility.

They also encouraged EU Member States to:

17. support further development and implementation of spatially and temporally harmonized or standardized national forest inventory and monitoring methods, designs and analytical tools combining ground based and remotely sensed data;
 18. participate actively in the development of the Framework, including sharing of national expertise on combining field data and remote sensing.
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