



Council of the
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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Council

Subject: Informal meeting of Forest Ministers of the „For Forest Group“ (Vienna and Stuhleck, Austria, 25-26 September 2023)

- Information from the Austrian delegation, on behalf of the Austrian, Finnish, Slovenian and Swedish delegations

Delegations will find in the Annex a joint statement of the forestry ministers from Austria, Finland, Slovenia and Sweden made at the above meeting, which will be presented under ‘Any other business’ at the Council meeting (‘Agriculture and Fisheries’) on 20 November 2023.

JOINT STATEMENT

of the Ministers responsible for Forestry of Austria, Finland, Slovenia, Sweden

**Informal meeting of Forest Ministers of the
"FOR FOREST GROUP"**

**25 – 26 September 2023, Vienna and Stuhleck,
Austria**

**„Shaping the future of European forests and the
forest based sector – leading the way forward“**

Stuhleck, 26 September 2023

JOINT STATEMENT

Shaping the future of European forests and the forest based sector – leading the way forward

Forests and forestry's great importance to society have become the focus of increased attention and public debate. The increasingly visible effects of climate change and the resulting damages to forests, coupled with geopolitical and economic developments, have not only raised society's awareness on the state of forests and their economic value but have also showcased the importance and benefits of active forestry respectively with regards to alternative energy sources and circular economy. Natural disasters and the damages they have caused – from forest fires to the destruction of protective mountain forests, as well as pests and diseases – have demonstrated the urgent need to strengthen the health and resilience of our forests in the long term, thus securing the ecosystem services forests should continue to provide to society. It is important to tackle these challenges in forest policy and to develop efficient and practical solutions. We as forest-rich EU Member States should define forest policy priorities in order to contribute to a better understanding of the needs and benefits of active and sustainable forestry at EU and international level, as well as to further promote the exchange of knowledge. To this end, the Ministers responsible for Forestry of Austria, Finland, Slovenia and Sweden founded the "For Forest Group" as an informal platform for cooperation.

We, the Ministers responsible for Forestry, reaffirm the following points:

1. Strengthening sustainable forest management

Taking into consideration the multiple functions of forests, and their role for tackling challenges that our society is facing, it is important to promote and further develop sustainable forest management. This is the only way to preserve forests and their diverse ecosystem services and make them fit for the current challenges and future. Our efforts are based on the principles and criteria for sustainable forest management, developed in the Forest Europe process, in line with the global forest goals. The concrete design of

sustainable forest management should be adapted to national, regional and local conditions in order to achieve the best possible impact. This will ensure a balanced development of the three dimensions of sustainability within the framework of competent national forest policies and strategies. In addition, crisis management and cross-border cooperation need to be strengthened in order to better manage and prevent the effects of natural disasters.

2. Strengthening the bioeconomy through sustainable use of forest-based products

Forest-based products are renewable, resource efficient, versatile and essential for the growing sustainable bioeconomy. Sustainable forest management and wood use create jobs in rural areas, prepare the ground for innovation and investment and are an indispensable part of the energy transition. The long-term use of wood as a construction material is not only of growing economic importance, but also contributes to achieving climate targets. Other innovative wood products can increase the added value, while further reaching our climate targets. The production of energy from woody biomass is one of the cornerstones of a sustainable energy mix, substituting fossil energy sources, creating benefit in rural areas, while fostering diversification of reliable energy supplies and fostering effective use of resources. Moreover, wood utilization constitutes a prime economic factor in generating active, sustainable forest management. Sustainable forest management is an essential tool to provide and secure the various forest related ecosystem services. In order to realise the full potential of the bioeconomy to contributing to climate change mitigation, it is important to utilize the forest-based sector, while respecting biodiversity. In this context, we recognize the great importance of cross-country cooperation in forest sector policies and intend to continue on an ongoing basis. Sustainable forest management and wood use create jobs in rural areas, help in securing supply of important raw materials and prepare the ground for innovation and investment, while being an indispensable part of the energy transition.

3. Subsidiarity

As the competence to formulate forest policy has not been transferred to the EU level, the responsibility for policy making lies with the Member States and their respective forest laws and programmes, taking into account forest related EU policies. Any forest related policy is guided by the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality laid down in the EU Treaties. This means that the EU level shall not take action on forest related issues, unless these issues cannot be adequately addressed at national level. Any legislation affecting forests should not go beyond what is necessary. Ultimately, the addressees of forest policy are mainly those who have ensured the development of Europe's forests for generations. These private forest owners and forestry enterprises are directly affected by forest policy.

Accordingly, the point of reference for forest policy action is ownership oriented and the associated freedom of action and responsibility for the rural development and common good. This includes, in particular, entrepreneurial freedom within the framework of national forest laws. In general, care must be given to avoid additional requirements and costs for the enterprises and forest owners.

4. Forest policy direction in the EU

The European Green Deal 2019 has brought a substantial shift in EU policy. A large number of strategies and binding legal acts have a direct impact on forestry and the timber sector. Moreover, the trend towards binding EU rules within environmental and climate policy has intensified, in some extent to the detriment of national competences and room for maneuver in forest policy. With a view to the new EU legislative period, the coherence and impact of previous measures on forests and the forest-based sector need to be fully assessed before new binding provisions are adopted. Furthermore, impact assessments must consider various goals, including multifunctionality of forests. In general, EU Member States need to be closely involved in projects relevant to forest policy. Binding rules at EU level should be strictly limited to what is necessary to achieve EU objectives. Further coordination, voluntary measures or strategies are given priority to binding requirements, and EU directives should take precedence over regulations. It is also important to avoid fragmentation of forest policy, different definitions and to maintain coherence between the different policy objectives at EU level. EU Member States and forest holdings must be given the necessary leeway in the design of forest development and forest management. Useful tools at EU level are platforms for coordination and knowledge sharing, supported by digitalisation. Their potential therefore should be further developed.

Norbert Totschnig

Austrian Federal Minister for Agriculture,
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Sari Essayah

Finnish Minister of Agriculture and Forestry

Irena Šinko

Slovenian Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food

Peter Kullgren

Swedish Minister for Rural Affairs