

Forests in the EU - Seeing the forest behind the trees

Conference statement by Great Lakes and Wetlands Association

Forest ecosystems benefit all of society, helping to provide resilience and capacity for adaptation as the climate and environment change. Just as important or more important than their provision of timber and other products, forests and especially primary forests provide carbon storage (as recognised also in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030); regulate and filter the water supply; regulate and buffer microclimate; provide habitat for an overwhelming number of species, including pollinators; and provide nature-based recreation.

However, forests in the EU are in terrible condition. According to the 2020 EEA State of Nature in the EU report, only 14% of forest habitats in the Natura 2000 network¹ exhibit favourable conservation status. Fortunately, the EU's Biodiversity Strategy 2030 calls for strict protection of all primary and old growth forests. However, this only amounts to 4% of Europe's forests. More is needed.

We call the European Commission to fully recognise:

- The centrality of protecting and restoring natural forests for preserving biodiversity, as well as mitigation of climate change and adaptation to its impacts, and
- That forests are already under unprecedented pressure, meaning there is no way they can meet increasing demands by the bioeconomy;
- That natural habitats are self-sustaining and do not require active forestry management.

We therefore ask the European Commission to take the following steps:

- In line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, urgently implement the strict protection of at least 15% of total forest cover in Europe with the focus on state forests to restore functioning natural forest ecosystems that exhibit the full array of species and stable carbon stocks in plants and soils.
- Implement the EU Nature Restoration Law without delay and use the National Restoration Plans to re-establish forest wilderness and promote conversion of plantation forests to natural forests. This will require:
 - Dedicated financial support for restoring and protecting forest ecosystems;
 - Enforcing the EU Habitats Directive, including increasing the European Commission's legal resources to deal with the current backlog of pending complaints and cases linked to forests
- Support enactment and implementation of a strong Forest Monitoring Law, which must improve transparency of forest related information especially in public forests
- Implement the EU Deforestation Regulation without any further delay
- In line with Target 18 of the Global Biodiversity Framework, eliminate subsidies for activities that are harmful to forests, in particular, bioenergy subsidies for use of forest biomass
- A greater focus on how to reduce extraction of timber, including support for full implementation of the cascading principle and abandoning the idea that the "bio-economy" can be fed with wood from forests.
- Align all relevant policies and action with the overwhelming priority of helping Member States and the EU as a whole meet land carbon sink targets by taking pressure off of forests.

¹ the EU's flagship protected area network intended to "ensure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats,"

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Considering the climate emergency, **we call the Hungarian government** to take the following urgent actions during the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union:

- Take every possible steps to enact a strong Forest Monitoring Law, which must guarantee transparency of forest related information especially in public forests
- Support the urgent implementation of the EU Deforestation Regulation without any further delay in the Council
- During the Council Presidency ensure that the EU's position for the COP16 of the Convention on Biological Diversity is in line with target 18 of the CBD Global Biodiversity Framework and eliminate subsidies for activities that are harmful to forests, in particular, bioenergy subsidies for use of forest biomass

Scientific evidence suggests that the higher a forest's naturalness, the greater its resilience and resistance to threats, and the greater its climate mitigation benefit and adaptive capacity. Based on the latest national report, the naturalness of forests in Hungary is very low (only 355 hectares being considered as natural² out of the almost 2 million hectares of "forests"). In order to improve forest naturalness in Hungary, we demand the government taking the following actions for the interest of current and future generations:

- With reference to the political commitment made towards the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, urgently increase the areas of strictly protected forests to at least 15% of total forest cover in Hungary with the focus on state forests
- Reduce the use of firewood in the country through stop subsidies for biomass power plants and supporting households' energy efficiency
- Differentiate between forests of native species and tree plantation with the national land registry in order to increase transparency about naturalness of our forests
- Implement the EU Nature Restoration Law without delay and use the National Restoration Plan to restore functioning natural forest ecosystems that exhibit the full array of species and stable carbon stocks in plants and soils with special focus on re-establishing forest wilderness and promoting conversion of plantation forests to natural forests. This will require:
 - Dedicated financial support for restoring and protecting forest ecosystems;
 - Enforcing the EU Habitats Directive with special attention to appropriate assessment before any logging intervention inside Natura 2000 sites
- Align all relevant policies and action to increase land carbon sink targets by taking pressure off of forests.

² https://nfk.gov.hu/Magyarország_erdeivel_kapcsolatos_adatok_news_513