



Press Release
Luxembourg, 4 October 2021

EU forestry strategy: positive but limited results

Although forest cover in the EU has grown in the past 30 years, the condition of those forests is deteriorating. Sustainable management practices are key to maintaining biodiversity and addressing climate change in forests. Taking stock of the EU's 2014-2020 forestry strategy and of key EU policies in the field, a special report from the European Court of Auditors (ECA) points out that the European Commission could have taken stronger action to protect EU forests, in areas where the EU is fully competent to act. For instance, more could be done to combat illegal logging and to improve the focus of rural development forestry measures on biodiversity and climate change.

Funding for forested areas from the EU budget is much lower than funding for agriculture, even though the area of land covered by forests and the area used for agriculture are almost the same. EU funding for forestry represents less than 1 % of the CAP budget; it is focused on support for conservation measures and support for planting and restoring woodland. 90 % of EU forestry financing is channelled through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

"Forests are multifunctional, serving environmental, economic and social purposes, and setting ecological boundaries, for example on the use of forests for energy, is ongoing" said Samo Jereb, the member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. *"Forests can act as important carbon sinks and help us reduce the effects of climate change, such as forest fires, storms, droughts, and decreasing biodiversity, but only if they are in a good state. It is the responsibility of the European Commission and the Member States to step up actions to ensure resilient forests."*

The auditors found that key EU policies do address biodiversity and climate change in EU forests, but that their impact is limited. For instance, although the EU Timber Regulation prohibits the marketing of illegally harvested timber and timber products in the EU, illegal logging still occurs. There are weaknesses in Member States' enforcement of the Regulation, and effective checks are often missing, also on the part of the Commission. Remote sensing (Earth observation data, maps and geo-tagged photographs) offers great potential for cost-effective monitoring over large areas, but the Commission does not use it consistently.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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The EU has adopted several strategies to address the poor biodiversity and conservation status of EU forests. However, the auditors found that the quality of the conservation measures for these forest habitats continues to be problematic. Despite 85% of the assessments of the protected habitats indicating bad or poor conservation status, most conservation measures aim only to maintain rather than to restore status. In some afforestation projects, the auditors noted clusters of monoculture; mixing diverse species would have improved biodiversity and resilience against storms, droughts and pests.

The auditors conclude that rural development measures have had little impact on forest biodiversity and resilience to climate change, in part because of the modest spending on forests (3% of all rural development spending in practice) and weaknesses in measure design. The mere existence of a forest management plan – a condition for receiving EAFRD funding – provides little assurance that funding will be directed to environmentally sustainable activities. Furthermore, the common EU monitoring system does not measure the effects of forestry measures on biodiversity or climate change.

Background information

The EU has endorsed international agreements (the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its Sustainable Development Goal 15) and therefore needs to respect a number of targets directly related to biodiversity in forests. In addition, the EU treaties call upon the EU to work for the sustainable development of Europe. However, the 2020 State of Europe's Forests report concluded that the condition of European forests is generally deteriorating; other reports and data from Member States confirm that the conservation status of EU forests is in decline.

The Commission unveiled its new EU Forest Strategy in July 2021.

Special report 21/2021: *“EU funding for biodiversity and climate change in EU forests: positive but limited results”* is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu).

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