

EU to plant three billion trees by 2030 under new forestry plan

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The European Commission unveiled on Friday (16 July) its new forest strategy - including a commitment to plant at least three billion additional trees in the EU over the next decade to boost natural greenhouse gas removals.

In the EU, forests account for about 38 percent of the total land surface. Finland (71-percent of total land area) and Sweden (67 percent) are the most heavily-forested countries, followed by Slovenia, Estonia and Latvia.

However, extreme weather events and the increasing demand for forest services and products, driven by wood-based bioenergy and international trade, has accelerated tree-cover loss in the last decade.

The [new strategy](#) recognises the importance of forests in the fight against climate change - but also their role in the renewable energy mix of the EU - of which wood-based bioenergy is the main source.

However, for the first time, the commission has warned that increasing harvesting for long-lived wood products is unlikely to compensate for the reduction of the net carbon sink associated, urging member states to pay attention to "this risk".

And - although many EU policies have an impact on forests in the EU and beyond - forestry policy is still primarily a national competence.

The proposal says that the bio-economy should be "boosted within sustainable boundaries" in a way that minimises its impact on biodiversity.

Under the updated renewable energy directive, the commission has also strengthened its ["sustainability criteria"](#) used to determine whether a form of forest biomass can be considered renewable.

For example, primary and old-growth forests (both highly-biodiverse forests) would be completely protected against burning biomass. But they only represent around three percent of EU forested land.

Additionally, the proposal reinforced the so-called "cascade principle" - in a bid to reduce the use of quality roundwood (timber which is left as small logs) for energy production.

Under this principle, wood should be used as much as possible for long-lived materials and products - such as buildings and furniture.

The strategy also emphasises the need to set out incentives to reward forest-owners for biodiversity-friendly management practices - with a "closer-to-nature" voluntary certification scheme.

'Not enough'

However, green groups have denounced the proposal for keeping economic incentives to harvest and burn forest biomass, and falling short on safeguards.

In 2018, energy-producers burning biomass in the EU received more than €10bn in public subsidies.

"The demand for wood is only increasing, and while the Forest Strategy is proposing some measures to protect our forests and the biodiversity that depends on them, it simply is not enough to guarantee the survival of nature," said Martin Harper from NGO BirdLife Europe

Similarly, Kelsey Perlman, from the NGO Fern, said that the strategy cannot address the demand for wood, driven by the EU law on renewables, and the promotion of the bioeconomy. "The proposed remedies are too timid to face up to the challenge," he said.

Since 2007, no reporting requirements for EU member states are in place, and therefore information concerning the status of forests in the EU is limited and fragmented.

However, scholars [using satellite images](#) estimated in 2020 that the canopy - the vegetation cover of treetops - of more than 36 million forest areas in Europe has been lost over the past 30 years.

Under the EU forest strategy, the commission has committed to putting forward a legislative proposal for an EU-wide integrated forest-monitoring framework - including strategic plans for forests to be developed by national competencies.

But the proposal has been weakened by [industry lobbyists](#) and member states. The previous draft contained mandatory indicators for assessing whether a forest is "sustainably" managed.

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