

Ex-post Evaluation of the EU Forest Action Plan (2007-2011)

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Synthetic summary

Aim and methods of the ex-post evaluation of the EU Forest Action Plan

The EU Forest Action Plan (2007-2011) is the main instrument for the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy. The responsibility for forestry policy lies with the Member States, but the Community can contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Forest Management and the multifunctional role of forests through coordination and exchange of information. The EU Forest Action Plan covered four objectives which aimed to contribute to the long-term competitiveness, enhance and protect the environment; contribute to the quality of life; and foster coordination and communication.

The aim of the ex-post evaluation was to:

- Review the implementation, effectiveness and appropriateness of the EU Forest Action Plan;
- Analyse whether the objectives of the EU Forest Action Plan have been met, if it has led to any side effects, the instruments used are appropriate, relevant, effective and efficient, and what was the role of the key actors;
- Examine whether the EU Forest Action Plan is the most suitable framework for forest related actions and as an instrument for coordination between the Community and Member States.

The evaluation is based on extensive document reviews, questionnaire surveys and interviews of the Member States, Commission and stakeholder representatives. The analytical work is based on the intervention logic, including inputs, outputs, effects and long-term impacts. The evaluation was carried out by an external evaluation team between November 2011 and March 2012. Conclusions are based on the qualitative analysis and the evaluation team's expert opinion. The work was guided by a Steering Group composed of Commission representatives. The work is structured under five Evaluation Questions that were formulated for the evaluation.

1. To what extent have the activities in the framework of the EU FAP been effective and efficient?

The implementation of the EU Forest Action Plan was effective and efficient in the manner that the Action Plan has been largely implemented as defined in its work programme 2007-2011. Implementation made use of, for example, studies to investigate forestry related issues, and Standing Forestry Committee ad hoc Working Groups to gather technical expertise on specific topics. Member State joint statements were defined as Standing Forestry Committee opinions on e.g. forest research, forestry measures in rural development, non-wood goods and services, wood mobilisation, and climate change and forestry. Objective 1 **improving the long-term competitiveness of forestry** contributed to improved understanding on effects of globalisation on forestry; valuation and marketing of non-wood forest goods and services, and; wood mobilisation for energy generation. There was a positive impact on research and technological development and forestry measures in rural development. Objective 2 **enhancing and protecting the environment** contributed to improved information on climate change and forestry (including EU and international commitments) and information sharing on biodiversity targets. There were steps taken towards a European forest monitoring system, although the future depends on continued funding and voluntary co-operation by Member States. Objective 3 **contributing to the quality of life** shared information between the Member States on environmental education and information; protective functions of forests; and the potential of urban and peri-urban forests. There is impact on integrating forest protective functions in risk

management and prevention initiatives in the EU. Objective 4 **fostering coordination and communication** strengthened the structure and mechanisms for implementation of the Action Plan, and contributed to investigations on public procurement of wood and wood products as well as on EU forest communication strategy. Impact on international processes was weak, but the Action Plan was a positive means to build synergies with the FOREST EUROPE process.

There were no specific resources earmarked for the EU FAP, but implementation was based on existing resources e.g. Rural Development Programmes in the Member States and other EU and national funding. Some activities found their role more naturally at EU level (Objective 1 on economic aspects, Objective 2 on environmental aspects, and Objective 4 on coordination and communication), whereas other activities were mainly implemented at national or even local levels (Objective 3 on socio-cultural aspects, but also e.g. forest owner cooperation and forest sector visibility events). Although the EU FAP resulted in several concrete outputs, such as reports, studies, working groups and recommendations, the uptake at Member State and Community levels remains weak. Furthermore, activities at national (and regional) level are not reported as contribution to the EU FAP goals, and the EU added value remains often unattained.

2. To what extent have the activities in the framework of the EU Forest Action Plan contributed to the improvement of coherence and cross-sectoral co-operation in implementing the EU Forestry Strategy?

The EU Forest Action Plan has been helpful for information exchange within the Commission, between Member States and between the Commission and Member States. However, due to its character as a voluntary instrument, improvement in cooperation and coordination depends on the commitment of the Commission Services and the Member States. The EU Forest Action Plan enabled information sharing and provided an agenda for raising awareness and understanding about forest-related issues across policy areas (e.g. rural development, research and development, climate action, risk management and prevention). Although in the beginning of the EU Forest Action Plan implementation there were expectations of a more proactive and holistic approach to forestry-related issues in the EU, the Action Plan has only been able to react to ongoing developments in other policy areas, e.g. in energy and renewable energy fields. An impact can, however, be found in terms of the Seventh Framework Programme implementation for forest and forest-based sector research, and on the definition of forestry measures in the preparation of the proposed new rural development regulation. The influence of the EU Forest Action Plan on national forest programmes varies between the Member States. Most countries replied that their national forest programme considered the EU FAP to some extent, and that the Action Plan was an additional driver in other national policies, such as in the rural development programmes, in bio-energy strategies or in public procurement guidelines. The steps towards a coherent and consistent forest monitoring for the EU27 still requires political commitment and resources.

3. To what extent have the activities in the framework of the EU Forest Action Plan contributed to balancing economic, environmental and socio-cultural objectives related to forestry?

The EU Forest Action Plan addressed the three dimensions of sustainable development through Objectives 1 to 3. Objective 4 on coordination and communication was important in terms of enabling a balanced view on Sustainable Forest Management, but implementation of specific actions (e.g. on promotion of forest biomass for energy generation, or actions on biodiversity or valuation and compensation mechanisms for non-wood forest goods and services), the potential was hardly used to develop an integrated approach to sustainability. The three sustainable development dimensions remained largely separated from each other. The socio-cultural objective activities were carried out at Member State level, but they were hardly reported on or coordinated through the Action Plan at EU level. The EU Forest Action Plan was not actively utilised as a framework to define an EU level vision and priorities overarching the national and sectoral definitions of multifunctionality and Sustainable Forest Management. The Action Plan implementation furthermore did not fully utilise support measures for forestry, such as education

and advice, with the potential to build capacities for the whole sector to address new challenges and new societal demands.

4. To what extent did the EU Forest Action Plan have an added value in implementing the EU Forestry Strategy?

The EU Forest Action Plan covered the principles defined in the EU Forestry Strategy and provided an added value by operationalising them in the Key Actions and activities. The Action Plan did influence several processes both at Member States and Community level. The main achievements and added value in implementing the Forestry Strategy goals refer to a better visibility of the forest sector at EU level, facilitation for improving coherence and coordination of activities between different Community actions and for improving coordination of activities between the Commission and Member States. It is nonetheless difficult to point out the causal links of the Action Plan implementation and specific effects, because several processes are ongoing in parallel and interlinked with impact on forestry in the EU. Developments in parallel sectors and policy fields (e.g. climate action, energy, industry) have generated an increased interest in forests, and the EU Forest Action Plan was a means to address these developments and keep the forestry-specific issues on the agenda. Thus, without the EU Forest Action Plan, the responses of the forestry sector would most likely have been more sporadic. The achievement of the goals will however, dependent on the commitment of the Commission and Member States to put the Action Plan results into use also after concluding the implementation in 2011.

5. Are the current objectives, key actions and activities of the EU Forest Action Plan still relevant in tackling the needs the Plan was intended to address? To what extent is the organisational set-up of the EU Forest Action Plan as a whole adequate for its purpose?

International policy developments have caused and are causing shifts in priorities which were not foreseeable to a full extent when preparing the Action Plan. The processes in, for instance, climate change action and renewable energy targets, as well as the aspirations expressed in the new biodiversity targets and the bioeconomy strategy, present the forest sector with possibilities but also challenges. To a certain extent, the EU Forest Action Plan responded to these changing needs, but it was not able to build capacities for a dialogue at multiple levels (EU, national, regional or local) or to develop a common response to these policy developments.

The organisational set-up based on the existing structures (Standing Forestry Committee, Advisory Group on Forestry and Cork, Interservices group on Forestry) was largely purposeful for the EU Forest Action Plan implementation – taking into account that the Action Plan was a voluntary instrument – these structures provided an opportunity for Member States to share information and experiences. A more structured coordination would have required a clearer vision, target-setting and high-level political commitment to the goals defined.

In the process of defining the follow-up after the EU Forest Action Plan, the viewpoints of the Member States, Commission and stakeholders are valuable. It is important that the debate about the follow-up reaches beyond the mere Action Plan implementation in the forestry sector, and includes beneficiaries of the intended measures at large. Bringing the achievements as well as the challenges ahead for forestry in Europe to an EU forum would help in understanding the complexity of issues at stake, but also in setting a target for the long-term sustainability of the EU forests that we want to pass on to future generations.

Conclusions and key recommendations

The EU Forest Action Plan has been a useful means of operationalising the EU Forestry Strategy principles and coordinating action across the Member States and EU. There are limitations to the leverage that the Action Plan can exert on policy processes at EU level or implementation at Member State level; without a shared vision for EU forestry, the forestry response to the developments in other policy areas (e.g. climate action and energy) remains

weak, and without clear commitments and targets the Member State reporting to EU level continues to lack consistency.

Based on the ex-post evaluation analysis, the following key recommendations are put forward as a contribution to the deliberations on the review of the EU Forestry Strategy and the possible follow-up to the Action Plan.

1. In order to increase commitment to an EU Action Plan, a joint effort is needed to develop and operationalize a common vision of multi-purpose and sustainable forest management. This would cover the following aspects:

- assess present and future societal demands on forests;
- balance the three dimensions of sustainable development, strengthening and defining a holistic view of Sustainable Forest Management in the EU;
- build capacities at both EU and Member State level to address new challenges and new societal demands for sustainable and innovative forest management, for example, in forest information and monitoring, research and innovation, education, advisory services and communication.

2. In order to support effects and impacts of an EU Action Plan, strengthened instruments and structure for mutual information exchange and joint action are needed. This would cover the following aspects:

- define priorities and targets for action;
- link EU and Member State level funding strategies and plans to the EU Forestry Strategy and the EU Forest Action Plan priorities and actions;
- strengthen coherent cross-sectoral planning, funding and implementation of activities;
- besides pre-defined measures, maintain the possibility to define additional actions or refocus existing ones if the need arises during the implementation period;
- set up a clear mechanism for monitoring, evaluating and reporting;
- revise the mechanisms for involving stakeholders from economic, environmental and social interest fields;
- advance dialogue to support public awareness raising, science-policy-practice interaction, and improved preparedness for emerging challenges and opportunities.