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MINUTES

Joint Meeting of the Standing Forestry Committee and the Civil Dialogue Group “Forestry & Cork”

15-16 October 2020 (Videoconference, Webex)

Chair: Mr Mauro Poinelli (European Commission) and Mr Antonio Paula Soares/Mr Mårten Larsson (CDG Forestry & Cork)

Organisations present: All Member States were present except Denmark, Luxembourg and Romania and from CDGFC all organisations were present, except EFFAT.

1. Adoption of the agenda

The Chair informed that the agenda point on the exchange of views on the new EU Forest Strategy is postponed. The Commission indicated that another Webex meeting will be organised as soon as there will be documents publically available, which will give the background for discussions. Many Member States and stakeholders voiced their concerns that this may exclude them from discussions and they highlighted the importance of their involvement.

The Chair also informed that a new agenda point was requested by MS, which is the presentation by the EFI on the recent work on harvesting in the Member States. Under AOB there will be a short point on the SFC annual plan, information about the recent Communication on the Renovation wave, and information on the latest Eurobarometer survey.

With these changes, the agenda was adopted.

2. Nature of the meeting

The meeting was non-public.

3. Items discussed

1) Reflection on the discussions in the Seminar

The Commission (DG AGRI) presented the summary of the seminar on how to secure and demonstrate Sustainable Forest Management in the EU in the context of the EU Green Deal

and the new EU Forest Strategy that was held the day before (15 October). The detailed summary can be found in Annex III of the Minutes.

CEPI highlighted the importance of demonstrating SFM in the future EU Forest Strategy, by proposing an action (for SFC, Member States, EC & relevant stakeholders) to continue the development of non-end-use-specific sustainability criteria to be used in different sectoral EU policies referring to forests and/or forestry.

Sweden would be interested in further strengthening Member States cooperation and exchange of experiences, particularly on building an attractive “narrative” to show how SFM is implemented on the ground. SE would be happy to contribute and share their examples of communication with and between forest owners. While SE can agree that indicators and data quality can always be further improved, this is not always the solution: we have to also tackle the fact that, despite of the fact that many MS have good NFI data and data are available and also reported, people pay more attention to a study (e.g. the Nature article on harvesting) which presents different data, showing mistrust on the quality-checked information experts provide.

Cia Agricoltori Italiani stressed the importance of the holistic approach to SFM, and the need to consider all its components. The big data is very good, but consideration what happens in different territories is also important.

Belgium stated that the report presented by the Commission is good and could be a basis for the new EU Forest Strategy.

EUSTAFOR supported a comprehensive approach to forests. In the future, they would like to see that these discussions continue, framed under the EU Forest Strategy. They would also like to see further involvement of the Member States, Commission Services and all stakeholders in these meetings. EUSTAFOR supports development of specific set of criteria and indicators regardless of the end use to be used by all other policy areas, which need to refer to SFM.

CEPF agreed with EUSTAFOR, that these discussions need to continue under the framework of the preparation of the new EU Forest Strategy. The discussions on measuring and demonstrating SFM should be one of the pillars of the new EU Forest Strategy, as well as reiterating existing definition and principles.

COPA-COGECA considers that the principles of the current strategy should also be central to the future Forest Strategy, welcomes the discussions on SFM and asks for linking them closely with the future strategy. COPA-COGECA noted that not everyone sees SFM in the same way, so there should be more education events, to highlight the subject that forests in the face of the climate change need to be actively managed to stay there for future generations.

EURAF welcomed the excellent summary report. They highlighted that, in the context of climate change, forests and trees have many benefits in cooling climates outside the forest - for example, evapotranspiration causes further rainfall downwind.

FERN supports that demonstrating SFM, particularly the harder to demonstrate ecological and social aspects, should be a key part of the forest strategy. There are elements mentioned in the Green Deal communication, such as biodiversity-friendly practices, that can help develop this concept more thoroughly.

ELO mentioned that it seems that an important fact to keep from the summary is that society's perception of multifunctional forests must change. They also mentioned that there is perception that forest production is bad for sustainability, and this is why there is need to need to continually prove sustainability.

EOS asked when is the summary would be distributed.

ECVC mentioned the need to address social aspects, as we have a lot to learn about the consequences of EU policies in the forest areas, particularly after the countries join the EU. When Sweden joined the EU, some good Commission studies assessed these. There should also be some follow up on the issue of the competences.

DG AGRI concluded stating that the draft summary of the seminar will be circulated for further comments and enrichment. It also acknowledged the need for further discussions, hoping to be able to translate the outcomes from the seminar into concrete actions that can engage all stakeholders.

2) **Forest damages – exchange of views**

DG AGRI presented the work started with the Standing Forestry Committee last July 2020. **DG AGRI** started the work together with the JRC to collect data at MS level on forest harvesting and forest damages. **AGRI** compiled the data of the Member States in one document and presented it to the SFC, for verification and approval. The aim was to better understand the situation of the EU forests, linking their resilience and health status with the support to different policy priorities, and with the reported harvesting figures. The goal was to confirm harvesting levels, find out the causes of increases, and put harvesting figures in the context of increased forest area and growing stock. The report builds on the 18 Member States that provided information, plus data for 5 additional Member States found online. The analysis showed that salvage logging plays an important part of the increase in harvesting levels in the recent years; when excluding salvage logging, a moderate increase in harvesting of less than 5% is observed when comparing years 2004 and 2018.

Finland asked for additional time to provide comments in writing as they see the need to further improve the format of the report, and to clearly state the difference between national and satellite data. **FI** also asked for enhanced cooperation between the Member States and NFIs.

Poland thanked the Commission for including their data into a report, even if sent late.

CEPI asked if the report will include policy recommendations

AGRI replied that this is a fact-finding report, based on collecting and compiling official data and that there is no intention to include any policy recommendations.

Sweden agreed with statement by **FI** and requested that the report refer to some Member States questioning the article published in Nature about harvesting levels in the EU. They also asked to be a bit cautious in the report on the causality. They will send written suggestions.

Czech Republic stated that the harvesting levels need to be assessed in the context of the individual Member States. They noted the coincidence of the outcome that harvesting did not increase, beyond the natural disturbances, with the reality in the country.

The Netherlands underlined the importance of this data compilation. For data reported by only a few Member States, it would be good to signal how much EU forest area they cover.

COPA- COGECA requested that additional variables, such as prices of oil, price of wood, etc., be included.

CEPF raised the concern about the data used in the Nature article and asked if this report would be published.

Italy welcomed the information about the salvage logging. In Italy the administrative changes in recent years lead to the dispersion of the collection of forest data; there is work ongoing to improve and there may be a new forest inventory published next year.

Belgium asked why data are not present as m³/hectare. The forest area increases so it should normal to harvest more. In Belgium there are good data for public forests but not for private, so they did not provide data for Belgium. The public forests represent 30% of the area.

COPA-COGECA stated that before the increasing amount of wood coming from calamities forest owners have been invited to increase their harvesting activities (wood mobilization) to handle the increasing demand. Nowadays we see that there is no increased demand for biomass. But we need demand for low quality wood to finance thinning operations to adapt our forests to climate change.

CEI-Bois thanked DG AGRI and the Standing Forestry Committee for the work done on the causes of increased harvesting levels. It is of utmost importance to take into account the impact of the bark beetle outbreak and other forest disturbances for evidence-based policymaking.

CEPI welcomed the report. The forest area and growing stock are increasing, but the economy is also growing, so there will be more need to show the need to substitute fossil fuels. They asked if the growth of harvesting is also related to the growing economy

Estonia stated that the issue of increase harvesting is an important topic also at national level, and insisted on the need to have more cooperation.

EUSTAFOR asked how would the Commission use these results further.

CEI-Bois thanked the Commission for the work and important findings on the impact of disturbances. Bark-beetle disturbances further increased in 2019 and 2020, so we can expect that these rates will further increase also in next years.

FERN welcomed the data collection and highlighted that forest areas are increasing, but also harvesting levels. We need a balanced assessment of forest management, also looking into the biodiversity. They asked how can the data on private forests be improved.

DG AGRI clarified that the report is a fact-finding and collects the data from the Member States and that is why we will ask them again to verify what is there. Further, the Chair asked the Members to clarify how we can work on improving the data in the forests. Belgium clarified that the quality of the data is different between the private and public forests and while the NFI data are good quality and cover private and public forests, it is the data on salvage harvesting where we have better data for public forests. Similar is in the NL, where public forest administration has information on some diseases, pests, but other private

owners don't keep these records. While AT, FI, SK, SE, DE, ES, SI, LT, FR, LV, HR, EE, PT, DK, confirm that their data cover both private and public forests with the same level of accuracy and quality. In CY there are no private forests.

Greece asked if wind damages linked with the climate conditions can be compiled, to check impacts of climate change.

ELO suggested enriching this study in the future by further disaggregating data (including drought effects, for example).

DG AGRI replied that this may be difficult as data does not seem to be available. There may also be a connection of long drought periods with bark beetle infections. This would require further work on data collection and to also define what is the primary cause of the death of the trees.

DG ENV referred to the work of FISE, where discussions on forest data are taking place. It is important to look into trends, beyond what happened in the last 3 years. DG ENV invited all participants to participate in the NRC Forest Group coordinated by the EEA.

The Chair concluded that AGRI would update and revise the Report, which would be circulated again to the participants for comments.

3) **Presentation of the latest JRC study on harvesting levels**

JRC made a presentation that is available on CIRCABC.

Questions and answers

Cyprus asked if Cyprus was absent from the study.

JRC confirmed that some countries, such as Cyprus and Malta were not covered by the study.

Sweden thanked JRC for the presentation and stressed its shared enthusiasm for using satellite for monitoring forests, as it uses Sentinel's imagery to check the whole country twice a week and its remote sensing division of the forest agency is a great supporter of the technique. It raised several comments on the article that was published in Nature, as the presentation given by JRC focused a bit more on the uncertainties. In the article, it is claimed that the annual harvesting area in Sweden increased by 41% in the studied period, so 18,000 ha, which in volume would amount to 20 million m³. Opposite, Swedish university of agriculture, NFI data and the Swedish remote sensing analysis' team, supported by satellite imagery, points to a 7-8% decrease in this period. Official harvesting's statistics show indeed that the gross harvesting volume has somewhat increased by around 3%. Thus, Sweden investigated further to understand where from the big increase found by this study came from. It looked into other independent official statistics like productions, trade and energy ones. The consumption of roundwood in the Swedish industry (e.g. sawmill, panels, ...) increased by 3% but the consumption of roundwood for energy decreased by 5% during the said period. These changes correspond with official statistics at hand and the NFI. Following this, Sweden investigated its foreign trade statistics, but the roundwood export only increased by very little. Sweden stated that the explanation in the Nature's article related to the harvest increase, i.e. a growing bioeconomy, is not supported by Swedish production, trade, energy and nor employment statistics. Official Swedish statics do not indicate any increased use of unprocessed wood fuel nor an increase in diesel consumption (which are used by harvesting

machines). Moreover, Sweden pointed out that if more harvesting was taking place, more people should work in forestry, which official employment statistics do not confirm. Therefore, Swedish experts collegially agree that the 10 times higher harvesting rates that are presented in the study must come from fault in calculation and method, rather than the situation in Swedish forest or bioeconomy. Sweden raised its unhappiness about the study and stated that it is a faulty and misleading estimate of Swedish harvests.

JRC thanked Sweden for its interest and the careful check of its statistics. It stressed that the study was designed to look at the whole of Europe and should therefore not be looked at from a specific country angle. As a scientific body, JRC stressed its interest and concerns on the mismatches. This is why it looked into for further validation through visual assessment. This exercise confirmed JRC finding and the mismatch source has still not been found. It called for joint work to understand where the discrepancies originate from. JRC added that a statistical comparison of time series of their remote sensing data and Swedish national statistics for final felling were statistically close, according to t-test. The only exceptions being anomalies in the most recent data. The only documented changes that may have reduced the temporal consistency in the Global Forest Cover dataset used for the analysis are a 1) new algorithm implemented in 2011, and 2) the entering in service of Landsat 8 from 2013 onward, These discontinuities cannot explain the gaps. Thus, reasons remain unclear and JRC calls for further joint work to solve this.

EUSTAFOR endorsed the ambition of having a common methodology for forest statistics in the Union. This being said, Eustafor members reported opposite conclusions than the one presented by JRC. Investigation on this will be needed said Eustafor but at this stage, the important point is that the results of this much-debated and much-criticised study are currently being used as proof for the intensification of harvesting in recent years. Eustafor found this unfortunate since it adds confusion to the discussion. Eustafor said it would welcome comments from the Commission on this.

JRC reiterated its call for a joint effort to understand where the gaps are coming from. It stressed that the future EU Observatory on deforestation and forest degradation will help to have a platform to discuss and produce a joint effort. The Observatory is expected to be the place to collect all available data and to harmonise it. JRC noted that the situation is unfortunate but that this is a normal way for sciences to progress.

Hungary thanked JRC for its presentation and supported previous speakers' statement that remote sensing is an excellent tool to collect information and changes in forest and to improve forest inventory. In this, it fully supports the type of work done by JRC but added that as the outcomes of the study appeared to be in full contraction with Hungarian national data, the first logical step should have been to contact the Member States for verification said Hungary. It noted that Hungary was not approached to comment on the outcomes, which could have been very interesting. Hungary stressed its trust in its national data, but when such different assessments are produced, it would have welcomed the opportunity to reflect on JRC assessments, to compare them with national data and to verify them. At the moment, the credibility of the EU is very much undermined in what is happening in forestry stated Hungary. In one hand, there is national data, that does not show an important increase in harvested areas, and on the other hand, there is this study, which got worldwide publicity. Hungary questioned how partners of the EU would trust it, for example in the frame of the climate change negotiations. Hungary noted that politicians usually have no time to go in-depth in the details of the article. The only take out messages that politicians got was that national data is not reliable, that there could be a 30% more harvesting taking place. This made a lot of harm, which could undermine the future of forest management at the national level warned Hungary. Hungary concluded that the missing part was the close contacts between JRC and the Member States and a coordinated verification before publication.

Hungary is open to discuss the results to guide it in the right direction to avoid a further similar issue.

JRC acknowledged that the paper was overinterpreted and that overinterpretation of results is always an issue. The initial scope was to explore the possibilities offered by remote sensing to produce spatial data and timely outcomes. JRC agreed that consensus should be aimed at and reached and noted that this can only be achieved by data analysis. For this JRC stressed the need to incorporate satellite images in the upcoming EU Observatory work. It called to integrate and design within the Observatory a place to work jointly on the issue. JRC acknowledged the difficulties produced by the publication in Nature but reminded that as a research institute, it needs to “open the way” for new developments.

Spain thanks for the detailed and comprehensive presentation and noted that it was surprised as other colleagues by the alarming results of the study, which announced harvested volumes exceed by far any official statistical data or inventory. In addition, Spain noted that the areas identified in the article do not correspond in most cases to productive forest areas with relevant industries, which could have been identified as a possible cause. Spain compared JRC estimates with two different data sources and statistical data, in a similar way as described by Sweden. In all cases, Spain pointed out that the estimates are significantly lower, and consistent between themselves. Spain suggested possible reasons for this difference such as the methodology, misclassification of forest affected by natural disaster (e.g. forest fires, drought, pests or illnesses). Spain sees the need to compare the JRC outcomes with high-resolution data and field data. For this, it asked about the possibility of accessing the georeferenced results of the article by open-access or by request. Spain concluded by stating that it values remote sensing tools to support national forest data. However, it believes it is critical to compare any results from remote sensing data sources with reliable field data, especially when the results are alarming and inexplicable as in this case.

JRC acknowledged that Spain is one of the lesser examples of what happens in case of a continental assessment. It said that there might be some specific issue with data set such as the tree cover from Hansen, just because the definitions of forest are different. JRC stated that Hansen’s definition is when trees are at least 5-m height whereas the Spanish definition refers to 3m. Such country-specificities are a challenge to find the best balance with generality, and it will need to be improved. With regards to the code and analysis are publicly available and original Hansen’s dataset can be retrieved from Global Forest Watch’ website informed JRC.

Czech Republic asked about the exact definition of the term “harvested area”. It explained that in Czech Republic, there is a national limit of 1 ha for a clear-cut. In addition, any neighbouring clear cut can not take place before the regeneration and established regeneration, so at least 7 years. Therefore, Czech Republic asked how the study avoided to double count single and separate harvested area, that would happen in closely located areas.

JRC explained that gap sizes are evaluated yearly and that identification of newly harvested areas follows the new variation in tree cover in inter-connected pixels changing status during the same year. JRC noted that this approach is not perfect as two different properties connected by one corner could be mixed and considered as a single area. This aggregated can end up by generating larger clear cut than the administrative areas considered said JRC. JRC still stressed that this methodology is consistent across time, so in terms of trends, it remains valid even if the absolute values are higher due to the aggregates. Regarding the size of the gap, single-pixel harvested areas were excluded from the analysis said JRC due to their too-high uncertainties.

Austria stressed that the European National Forest Inventories' Network (ENFIN) is cooperating fruitfully with JRC for more than 10 years under framework contracts on harmonising European NFI results and information. This being said, Austria regretted that relating to the Nature's article ENFIN was not involved at all. For the future, Austria stressed the available expertise within the NFI that could support JRC, including on the use of remote sensing tools for forestry application. Austria pointed out that ENFIN published a detailed overview of the identified shortcoming of the article (see http://739uq.w4yserver.at/images/download/ENFIN_response_NatureArticle_2020.pdf). One of these shortcomings said Austria is the definitions, as national forest definitions are not accounted for at all. To illustrate this, for Austria the paper assumes a crown cover of 55%, the double of the national definition. This could explain the mismatches said Austria. For future work, Austria called for much more cooperation when working on remote sensing data within the EU and to avoid a top-down approach. To this aim, the inclusion and gathering of the national expertise is crucial, gathering should not be limited to data. For the near future, it will not be possible to base forest information to just remote sensing explained Austria.

Austria also reminded that 1,000,000 plots in the EU are monitored by NFI. ENFIN and NFI are not old fashioned and has decade-long expertise with remote sensing while also being aware of the limitations of such techniques and the valuable role of field visits. Austria expected future cooperation between ENFIN and JRC, including on remote sensing technologies.

JRC took note of the Austrian suggestion and reiterated that this is aimed to happen within the EU Observatory. JRC called for NFI plots to be fully useful for remote sensing and to be designed for satellite imagery, and asked for accurate coordinates of those plots.

Austria answered that coordination has been discussed between ENFIN and JRC for more than 10-years and that solutions were already found. They can be used in the future.

Finland thanked for the presentation and the important discussion taking place in the SFC. First, Finland highlighted a few general comments: as many countries have decades of experience with NFI and as a matter of respect to them, it agrees with Austria on the importance of increasing cooperation in the future and to proof check results with national statistics. New methods should be proof checked with national statistics, even more, when they produce unexpected results. Finland informed that its data is publicly available. High-resolution remote sensing is developed in Finland, even from aeroplane image (so closer to ground level), which are combined with field inventory. For the future, Finland called JRC for close cooperation and to avoid developing new methodologies in isolation. Also, Finland brought some detailed comments: in the presentation, harvested patch sizes were shown, for Finland it gives 7 ha average size, which is well above national data where there is an average of 1.3 ha in private forests and 3ha in public forests. Finland understands that satellite imagery might mix up properties' boundaries, but this cannot be sufficient to explain this level of discrepancies. Finland called for real comparison with national statistics and stressed that the mathematical model or the coding might not be the main issues and that there could be something else. Finland reminded that "forest loss" is not an equivalent word for "harvest". "Forest loss" has a strong negative meaning and is related to deforestation, whereas "harvest" related to the normal harvesting within sustainable forest management practices. Finland concluded that is there is a clear need to be careful with chosen wording to avoid sending misleading messages.

JRC agreed about the cooperation point raised by Finland a suggested that the Observatory could be the formal set up for the future. With regards to the "forest loss", JRC said that it was an unfortunate use of the term, as it is the one originally used by Hansen in the tree cover dataset. JRC did not anticipate the impact it could have, nor the misinterpretations it

would cause and stressed it should have used “harvest”. On gap size, JRC believes still that the issue comes from the algorithm and used criteria to define where a gap ends and where the other one starts. JRC said that type of analysis and corrections would be quickly carried out when it would have access to detailed data.

Cepi thank for the presentation and stressed that the pulp and paper industry welcome sciences based and accurate sources as they are important for further development of bioeconomy. Based on the on-going talk and ENFIN called, Cepi noted that there are still many issues remaining relating to the study and they need to be solved. Cepi supported Hungary statement that when JRC publish such a controversial study it has devastating consequences on policymakers perception of the status of our forests. Cepi also supported the statement from Finland about the incorrect use of the term and the fact that the study had a wider outreach than just Nature’s readers.

JRC stressed that communication is challenging and that lesson from this study publication will be learnt, moreover when the results are so sensitive. JRC acknowledged that some media misunderstood the terms used and on every media interview, JRC tried to convey the correct message.

Estonia informed that its environmental agency wrote an article on the discrepancies found with the study. It also wondered with whom in Estonia JRC was in touch or cooperated with. It stressed that its national agency is much working with new technologies such as remote sensing and deplored the negative impact that the study had on the perception of Estonian work. Estonia, therefore, called for future close contacts ahead of any publications and wished that JRC would be in touch with Estonian NFI for the revised article in Nature.

CEPF underlined that this is an important discussion and noted that it would not comment on the scientific findings. CEPF welcomed the call of JRC for improved cooperation between field and satellite observations. CEPF recalled JRC stating that a scientist body “needs to be brave to open the debate”. However, CEPF noted that this article and the related study are going beyond scientific debate, as its results led to some misconceptions in the public debate and they are already influencing the policy discussion. JRC mentioned that the study aims to support Green Deal implementation, recalled CEPF. This is problematic as the scientific debate is not over while the policy consequences arise. Then, CEPF asked three questions. First, is the study endorsed by the European Commission and is it thus an official Commission study. Second, as JRC mentioned that this study could be a complementary tool to monitor bioeconomy, CEPF asked for more information on practical implication. Thirdly, as the Deforestation and forest degradation’s Observatory was already several times mentioned, CEPF asked is the method used in this study is aimed at being used in this context as well and on the link between the Observatory and the ongoing discussion.

JRC explained that as a research institute it does sciences and scientific support to policymaking, not policy. Therefore, its scientific production is approved within JRC own hierarchy and then shared with the Commission. JRC explained that the use of spatial results about forest resources could be a way to support the development of the Bioeconomy Strategy, e.g. the implementation of a policy that requires biomass or biological products will be informed with such data. JRC further elaborated that it would be interesting to be able to support a biomass plant by providing it with information on the spatial location of biomass, and thus optimise the sustainable use of the resource. This type of analysis, not this specific study, could be considered in this frame. On the EU Observatory for Deforestation and Forest degradation, JRC underlined that such EU Observatory would not focus solely on the EU. The Observatory aims to monitor global forests, including EU ones, with multiples objectives using multiple instruments said JRC. It will work specifically on tropical deforestation, following demands from the Commission, and focus on e.g. the assessment of

its link with the trade of specific commodities such as soybeans or beef. In addition, the Observatory will have a specific interest on EU forests, with focus on climate risk for forest (work is already ongoing within JRC) and how to better design adaptation strategies. The Observatory will help to better monitor the resources, with methodologies that could arise from this study. JRC stressed that the Observatory will be much broader than this study, both in terms of topics to address and in terms of the geographical scope.

The **Chair** thanked all participants for the interesting discussion and suggested to move to the discussion of the next point.

4) Presentation by EFI of the recent study

Marc Palahi, Ruben Valbuena and **Gert-Jan Nabuurs** from **EFI** gave a presentation entitled “*Errors undermine reporting harvest in a recent Nature article*”. These three scientists are the leading authors of a reply sent to Nature in response to the article from JRC. The whole group of authors consist of over 30 scientists from 14 countries including an author from the Hansen group. In this work, they found substantial errors both in the analysis and interpretations by JRC authors which invalidate both the claim of abrupt changes in forest harvesting as well as the causes behind it. According to EFI, the main flaws in Ceccherini et al article are: 1) the use of a remote sensing product that is not consistent over time and cannot be used to temporal analysis; 2) they did not factor out the natural disturbances whereas EFI identified several areas of natural disturbances claimed to be wood harvest ; 3) insinuations that harvest increase is due to bioeconomy growth is not supported by shown data.

EFI presenters concluded that their analysis shows that neither the claimed changes nor their supposed caused can be supported and that the abrupt changes in harvested area report by Ceccherini et al. are wrong. They indicated that the increasing impact of natural disturbances in Europe requires special attention and that, to inform policymakers, a collective European effort is needed to obtain data at a different spatial and temporal level as well as from different countries, disciplines and sources. They also called for urgent science-based climate-smart forestry strategies.

In answer to this presentation, JRC said the change that took place in the model in 2015 is not written in any technical document and it was therefore impossible for JRC to know about it. to which EFI asked clarification why JRC did not contact the original authors (Hansen et al). JRC further explained that this information was taken seriously, and therefore it was decided to run a validation exercise through a sample-based approach relying on the visual assessment of high-resolution aerial photographs in Scandinavian countries. However, this did not show a higher sensitivity to thinnings in the most recent years, as suggested by EFI. About natural disturbance, the maps presented include all the harvesting including natural disturbances. EFI author who replicated the maps data from the original author's code replied that it included the part where disturbances were factored out, and thus the maps included only harvesting as in JRC article. JRC clarified that the disturbances are factored out in the statistics presented aside from the map. On the attribution, it is a controversial point and the most uncertain as it is fundamentally difficult to establish a direct attribution of an event like harvesting in Europe. This was a minor part of the study. It was not possible to find another driver to explain the trend observed in the study. This certainly requires more work. The way forward is to try to understand better the problems and discrepancies. Doing it all together with EFI and other authors is the best way to go.

COPA-COGECA, UEF and **CEPF** expressed support to the presentations and conclusions of EFI.

Birdlife Europe asked on how these studies relate to the trend that has been reflected by the Member States in their National Energy and Climate Plans that natural sinks are decreasing due to several factors, including an increase of natural disturbances and increase of harvesting. That information reveals that around a third of the carbon sink declining out to 2030 compared to 2005.

Gert-Jan Nabuurs answered that the climate progress report does indicate a declining sink but that is only for the Kyoto protocol part of the reporting and that is different from the reporting of the full carbon sink. There are indications that the full sink is declining a little bit, not as much as what the Kyoto protocol part indicates.

CEPF asked if there will be a publication in the Nature Magazine of the more differentiated views compared to the ones presented in the initial article. This would allow that the group of people who read the first article are put in a position to also get the full picture. EFI answered that it may be published in a month if the replica is accepted by Nature. If these would not be published in Nature, it will be published somewhere else. JRC indicated that they also received the comments from EFI and replied to these so if Nature decided to publish EFI replica, JRC reply would also be published together with these comments.

Finland highlighted the importance of the excellent presentation by EFI, which is aligned with the worries on the initial article published in Nature.

Sweden indicated that the methodological exercise under discussion is very interesting and reminded that there are many independent sources of statistics that would have shown an indication of a change if there had been one, but they have not. From the SE official position, the results presented in Nature are faulty and impossible.

Poland expressed support to EFI opinion and stressed the strong need to consult the Member States before the publication of data. The results presented in Nature do not reflect the harvesting situation in Poland and it would be appreciated that data is checked with the Member States.

Austria said that after this discussion and all statements, a follow up is needed to find a common solution and communication line and asked what the European Commission intends to do.

DG AGRI stressed that it is important to remain careful to not underestimate political sensitivities. When new directions and instruments are explored, it is important to remain humble, transparent, prudent and opened to a cooperation inside the Commission and outside the Commission. This discussion has shown that the Members of the SFC are opened to cooperation to progress towards new technologies and DG AGRI expressed hopes that on the other side, there will be the same openness and transparency. DG AGRI has helped JRC to collect data on the national inventories and will distribute the information collected from the Member States on natural disturbances and presented during the morning session. Regarding the article in Nature, DG AGRI indicated that it will underline cooperation and prudence and that some clarifications should be brought to specify that the aim of the exercise was methodological exploration.

JRC replied that they are on a scientific agenda that should lead to the observatory to reach a different level for the monitoring and reporting of forest information at EU scale. The cooperation between NFI and remote sensing is important, and a formal process could be set to fully integrate these “two legs”.

5) Update on the CAP Strategic Plans and forest-related interventions

DG AGRI informed briefly the latest state of play in the decision about the CAP Regulation. DG AGRI also if the delegations would find useful to exchange examples and practices on forest-related interventions in the new CAP Strategic Plans. DG AGRI could help in creating a “living document” with examples and practices on forest-related interventions, which could be regularly updated with examples of forest-related interventions that the Member States are developing. Such a document could help develop new ideas and further provide support to the Member States for new reflections. These will only be examples for consideration by others Member States.

The proposal was supported by CZ, FI, SI, LT, IT, AT, SK, BG, GR, ES, HU, ELO, HR, BE and from COPA, CEPF, EURAFT, ELO, EUSTAFOR, USSE.

The Chair concluded that AGRI will communicate with the delegates on the next steps.

6) Presentation of the programme on the German presidency of the Council

The German Presidency reported about its on-going activities, especially in the framework of the Council Working Party on Forestry (WPoF). The current Covid-19 had a significant impact on the all foreseen plans and organisational matters of the Presidency, e.g. there will not be a Forest Directors meeting, but the Presidency is supporting the upcoming INTEGRATE Network Conference, which will be organised by WSL Switzerland and EFI on 10 November. This event will showcase best practices and will hopefully contribute to the constructive science and policy discussion on integrating biodiversity into sustainable forest management. Also, another online event will be organised by the Presidency, together with the Permanent Representation of the Bavarian State, on the matter of the post-2020 EU Forest Strategy on 1 December 2020.

With regards to the Presidency work in WPoF, the main focus is the EU Forest Strategy. The Presidency aims to reach Council Conclusion on this topic to provide the European Commission with concrete guidance for the drafting of the Strategy. It would stress the importance of taking into account the Green Deal, and the key role of forests for reaching all UN SDGs. The key aspect of the on-going discussion is to maintain multifunctional and sustainable forest management, following a holistic approach and the principles as defined by Forest Europe. Furthermore, the draft CC stresses following key subjects to address: the resilience and adaptation of EU forest to climate change; the enhancement of the forests and forest-based sector contribution to bioeconomy; and the question of forest and biodiversity. Lastly, the Presidency wants to address the fragmented forest-related policies and called for more coherence and consistency.

Other relevant topics for the work of the WPoF are the EU Statement of the postponed COFO; the EU positioning on the issue of deforestation at the global scale and as follow up of the Commission communication; the preparation of Council Decision, and hopefully adoption, of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement with Honduras

Questions and answers:

The Chair thanked the Presidency for its presentation and welcome the holistic approach foreseen.

Finland stressed that as the discussion on the EU Forest Strategy was postponed by the Commission and as many members of the SFC called for this discussion to happen, it is now even more important to support the achievement of Council conclusion.

Poland appreciated the effort done by the German Presidency. It concurred on the importance of adopting council conclusion. Poland also expressed regret that the EUFS was dropped off the agenda of the meeting. It hopes that the EC will intensify the inclusion of Member States for the next steps

Cepi stated that adaptation of EU forests to climate change seems to be one of the cores of the upcoming EU Forest Strategy. It asked what aspects of adaptation will be addressed within the new EU Climate Adaptation Strategy and in the EU Forest Strategy post-2020.

The Presidency reply to Cepi that this question would be better addressed by the European Commission. According to the Presidency, the adaptation of forests is a key element of the new Forest Strategy, seeing the current challenges faced by forests, such as droughts, storms, or bark beetle outbreaks. To reach a holistic approach, SFM will part of the solution to achieve climate resilience and well-adapted forests.

The Commission underlined that both processes are running in parallel. It stated that the two strategies will be complementary, thus the adaptation of forest will find a place in both strategies while avoiding overlapping.

Italy reminded that forest management aims to achieve different objectives. In this sense, active SFM is the multi-approach link to achieve the Green Deal.

CEI-Bois asked when the council conclusion on the deforestation file are foreseen.

The Presidency stated that as the Commission plans to publish a proposal during the first half of 2021, any council conclusion on that should not come before it. The German Presidency, however, will address the topic also at its WPoF meeting in November to ensure further information exchange with COM but also discussion among MS.

7) AOB and closing
a. SFC Annual Work plan 2021

Dan Burgar Kuželički (DG AGRI) informed about the SFC Annual Work Plan 2021 and invited the SFC delegates to provide topics of relevance that should be discussed next year. DG AGRI will compile all documents for the next meeting of the Standing Forestry Committee.

b. Communication on the Renovation Wave

Dan Burgar Kuželički (DG AGRI) informed that the Communication on the Renovation Wave, which was adopted on 14 October 2020, makes clear references to the use of wood in the construction sector:

- Minimising the footprint of buildings requires resource efficiency and circularity combined with turning parts of the construction sector into a carbon sink, for example through the promotion of green infrastructure and the use of organic building materials that can store carbon, such as sustainably-sourced wood
- The Commission promotes environmental sustainability of building solutions and materials, including wood and bio-based materials, nature-based solutions and recycled materials based on a comprehensive life-cycle assessment approach
- Nature-based materials such as wood can play a crucial role in the design of the New European Bauhaus as they can have a double benefit: stocking carbon emissions in

buildings and avoiding emissions that would have been needed to produce conventional construction materials.

c. Latest Eurobarometer survey

Dan Burgar Kuželički (DG AGRI) informed that the latest Eurobarometer Survey on CAP was published on 13 October 2020 and it also included 2 questions about Forests. https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/sustainability-rural-areas-food-security-commission-publishes-public-opinion-survey-eu-food-and-farming-2020-oct-13_en

The first question shows that 56% of Europeans think that the area covered by forests in their country has decreased compared with ten years ago. Only 10% believe it has increased. A similar proportion of 53% believes that area covered by forests across the European Union as a whole has decreased and only 7% that it increased. While the forest area has expanded by an area larger than the whole of Slovenia.

The second questions show that citizens believe that the most important benefits provided by forests include providing animals with natural habitats, preserving biodiversity and conserving nature (69%), absorbing carbon dioxide as well as contributing to fight climate change and its detrimental effects (65%).

4. Next meeting

The next meeting of the SFC will take place in December, while the next meeting of the CDGFC will take place in November.

5. List of participants - Annex

Participants of the SFC are listed in Annex I and participants of the CDGFC in Annex II.

Disclaimer

"The opinions expressed in this report represent the point of view of the meeting participants from agriculturally related NGOs at the community level. These opinions cannot, under any circumstances, be attributed to the European Commission. Neither the European Commission nor any person acting on behalf of the Commission is responsible for the use which might be made of the here above information."

(e-signed)

Mauro POINELLI
Head of Unit

Annex I: List of STANDING FORESTRY COMMITTEE participants– Minutes

MEMBER STATE	Ministry or Organization	NUMBER OF PERSONS
BE	Agency for Nature and Forests SPW	1 1
BG	Executive Forest Agency Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry	1 1
CZ	Ministry of Agriculture	3
DK	-	-
DE	Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Forsten Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture	1 2
EE	Ministry of Environment	1
IE	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine	1
EL	Directorate-General for the Forests and Forest Environment Hellenic Ministry of environment and energy	1 1
ES	Agricultura, Ramaderia, Pesca i Alimentació. Generalitat de Catalunya Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge	1 3
FR	Ministère de l'Agriculture et de l'Alimentation	2
HR	Ministry of Agriculture Ministry of foreign and european affairs	2 1
IT	Ministry of agriculture, food and forestry policies and tourism - General Directorate of Forests	2
CY	Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment – Department of Forests	1
LV	Ministry of Agriculture	1
LT	Ministry of Environment	2
LU	-	-
HU	Ministry of Agriculture	1
MT	-	-
NL	Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality Staatsbosbeheer	1 1
AT	Austrian Research Centre for Forests Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism	1 2
PL	Ministry of Environment The State Forest	1 2
PT	ICNF	3
RO	-	-
SI	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food	1
SK	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	1
FI	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Ministry for Foreign Affairs	1 1

SE	Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation	1
	Swedish Forest Agency	1

Annex II: List of CDGFC participants– Minutes

DELEGATION	NUMBER OF DELEGATES
BirdLife Europe	2
CEETTAR	1
CEI-Bois	2
CEJA	2
CEPF	8 (including Chair)
CEPI	2
COGECA	5
COPA	6
ECVC	3
EEB	2
EFFAT	0
ELO	5
EURAF	2
EUSTAFOR	2
FECOF	1
IFOAM	1
UEF	1
USSE	2
WWF EPO	2

Annex III: Summary of the Seminar on how to secure and demonstrate Sustainable Forest Management in the EU in the context of the EU Green Deal and the new EU Forest Strategy

The Seminar took place on Thursday, 15 October 2020 over the Webex platform and the Commission DG AGRI chaired it. More than 70 participants from the Member States, forest stakeholders, forest-based industry and forest NGOs listened to and contributed to the discussions.

The Seminar aimed to offer a platform to discuss amongst interested delegates openly and constructively the various options on improving how the SFM can further be used for demonstrating the contribution of forests to the manifold policy priorities while continuing to address all dimensions of sustainable development.

The Seminar started with a short introduction of the background papers circulated before the meeting, which covered the international and EU dimension of the Sustainable Forest Management, the existing reporting and monitoring processes and the work that was undertaken in 2014 and 2015 by the ad-hoc Working Group of the Standing Forestry Committee on the Sustainable Forest Management Criteria and Indicators.

To catalyze the discussions the Seminar was structured around three questions, to collect different views on the issues. The questions were accompanied by a series of suggested areas for discussion. The questions were:

- *Question 1: Currently some aspects of the SFM seem easier to demonstrate (e.g. economic) than others. How can the EU and its Member States **demonstrate the contribution of EU forests and the forest sector to the Green Deal and international sustainability commitments**?*
- **Q2: There are already systems for reporting and several reports presenting information on forests' status and trends. However, there might be a need to improve or reinforce them, given the many EU and global objectives related to forests. What additional actions/commitments should the Member States and/or the Commission pledge to further ensure and demonstrate the sustainable management of EU forests?**
- *Q3: How can the contribution of sustainable and multifunctional forest management to the many priorities be best **communicated** to different actors?*

A summary of the discussions:

- Participants underlined that Sustainable Forest Management is a concept that exists already for a long time, which is dynamic in seeking a balance of all relevant dimensions, and able to evolve and adapt to new situations and priorities. SFM thus includes different approaches between countries and, within them, different management models and practices.
- To demonstrate the contribution of the forests and the SFM to various objectives, it was stated that it is important to ensure multifunctionality, and show how forests can effectively provide their multiple services in a balanced way.
- It was highlighted the importance to look into the whole forest, forestry and forest–value chains and consider their contribution to the policy objectives. A good example is the role of forests in fighting climate change, where it is important to focus not only on forests' potential as a carbon sink but also on the substitution effect of forest-based materials.

- There was recognition of the Forest Europe SFM criteria and indicators to find the balanced representation of the three elements of sustainability, but it was also recognized that there is potential to add and improve those indicators if needed and when new demands arise, and also the need to have good data.
- While some aspects of SFM are easier to demonstrate, it is more difficult for others. Market and economic aspects are easier to compile and demonstrate comparing to e.g. biodiversity, which is difficult to monitor properly. Due to this, there may be a need to consider how to further strengthen certain dimensions, including also on the social functions of forests.
- The problem of reports with different or conflicting outcomes was mentioned, and the need to better understand why this is happening. At the same time, challenges exist on how data are aggregated at the EU level as aggregation, be it at Member State or EU level, often hides the real situation and trends as monitored and reported at regional and local levels. There is some feeling that the link with the data coming from the ground gets somehow lost in the process of aggregation.
- National Forest Inventories were mentioned as the most important way to show the state of forests, which also ensure solid management of forest-related data. The role of continued efforts towards Harmonization of data and their interpretation at national/regional and EU level was also highlighted.
- Another element to improve the visibility and communication of SFM could be to better put it in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and international commitments.
- The role of agroforestry and trees outside the forests to achieve some policy objectives was also mentioned, and that those aspects are currently neither well-reported nor harmonised, while they bring many important biodiversity and social benefits that should find due acknowledgement.
- One of the options suggested was to consider the possibility for a specific voluntary reporting on a subset of the FE Criteria & Indicators, which could be supplemented with additional information on a country level, narratives or case studies. This subset should be assessed more systematically, and probably more often, to paint a more comprehensive and regular picture of SFM.
- One way to find balance, show what we are doing and improve communication, maybe through enhanced **participatory approaches** that would encourage the involvement of the stakeholders in the development of national strategies and plans, forest management plans or equivalent instruments, as a way to bring the SFM concept on a more understandable level, and show how SFM is planned and implemented in practice.
- One of the essential points to facilitate the SFM demonstration would be to drastically improve communication between actors, be it on the ground, with the society and to politicians and policy-makers. There is often a different perception of what is going on with forests and the perception that the society actually has about it; an example is the recent Eurobarometer survey, which shows that a majority of EU citizens believe that forest area in the EU is decreasing.
- There is a need for solid indicators and their wise use to communicate and transfer the knowledge/understanding of the status of forest ecosystems, to communicate in particular to a chiefly urban society who lives far from the reality of forests and forest management.
- It is also important to communicate who is responsible for the management of forests, and what their objectives and visions are, to add the human dimension, as forest management is done by people on the ground, forest owners and forest managers, and rural dwellers. There is a need to connect them better with society, and the best way is to show it on the ground.

- The role of networks of managed forests for demonstration and communication, and the potential of building stories and narratives that illustrate what forests and forest management do and represent, beyond the complexity and abstraction of the SFM concept, were highlighted by several speakers, as a way for the public to experience and understand what is happening on the field.