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Agricultural Situation

EU Forest Strategy Criticized, Commission Proposes Action Plan

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Approved by:

Norval E. Francis, Jr.
U.S. Mission to the EU

Prepared by:

Karin Bendz

Report Highlights:

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has criticized the EU Forestry Strategy objectives saying they are often contradictory, expensive and not delivering significant results.

The European Commission proposes to step up its efforts on forestry and proposes to prepare an EU Action Plan for sustainable forest management. The Action Plan is to be presented in 2006.

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Court of Auditors Criticize EU Forest Strategy.

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has criticized the EU Forestry strategy objectives, saying they are often contradictory, expensive and not delivering significant results. The ECA recommends the Commission to re-examine several parts of the forestry strategy scheme and to do a review of the afforestation measures. The Afforestation measures are where farmers can receive EU support for planting forest on agricultural land. Between 1994-1999 about one million hectares of agricultural land was afforested, mainly in the Mediterranean countries.

About 35 percent of the EU is covered with forest and the forest sector is providing about 2.6 million jobs. The forestry strategy built its aims on two key concepts: the need for sustainable forest management and the need for forests to have a multifunctional (ecological, social and economic) role. The ECA claims that the ecological, social and economical objectives are often in conflict with each other, and that it is hard to evaluate the success of the program without an agreed EU-wide definition of forest.

The European Commission says many of the weaknesses identified by the ECA are already being dealt with. The Commission also rejected the ECA statement that a common definition of forest is required in order to evaluate the success of the forest strategy.

The planned EU spending on forests 2000-2006 is €4,7 billion, half for afforestation of agricultural land. The Commission has emphasized that, in the proposals for the post-2006 agenda, it is likely that the compensation period for income-loss caused by afforestation will be reduced from 20 to 10 years, to reduce costs.

European Commission proposes Action Plan for Sustainable Forest Management

In an effort to step up its achievement on forestry the European Commission is proposing to do so by preparing an EU Action Plan for Sustainable Forest management. The idea is that an Action Plan would enable the EU to take on a more pro-active approach to governing the EU's forests.

The need for the Action Plan has emerged from the review of the activities implemented in the context of the EU Forestry Strategy since its adoption in 1998. In this review it states that there has been progress in the sustainable management of the forests in EU over the last years, but the policy context is changing and according to the Commission, a more pro-active approach to governing the union's forests is needed in the future.

In total 160 million ha, or about 35 percent of the EU land area is covered with forests and other wooded land. Approximately 12 percent of the area is designated as protected forests. Due to the EU afforestation program and to the natural succession of vegetation, the forest cover in the EU is increasing, according to the Commission. However, according to a report from WWF¹ the lack of protection for Europe's forests is alarming and there is a dramatic and continuous loss of biodiversity, forest health, genetic diversity and naturalness today. WWF also claims in their paper that many of Europe's protected areas are not actually protected, they are parks that exist on paper only.

The Commission communication highlights that the competitiveness and the economic viability of forests in the "EU Forestry Model" is under increasing pressure. There are about 15 million private forest owners in the EU. These rely largely on wood sales for revenue. At the same time the forests are crucial for the fulfillment of the EU commitments to halt the loss of biodiversity and to mitigate climate change.

¹ <http://www.panda.org/downloads/forests/stateeuropeforests.pdf>

Sustainable forestry is an important part of the development of the rural areas in the EU. And the report stresses the importance of good governance for the protection and sustainable management of forests. Biotic factors and grazing are main causes of forest damage. Other major factors affecting the forests are air pollution, storms and forest fires, mainly in the Mediterranean region where about 0.5 million hectares of forest or other wooded land are burned every year.

Over the last few years, legislation has been adopted to ensure a more harmonized implementation of a number of key aspects of EU legislation on the marketing of forest reproductive material.

The European Commissions aim of the EU Action Plan for sustainable Forestry Management is to:

? Maintain the tradition of multipurpose forestry in the EU by changing the management practices that may reduce the economic viability of the forestry, that are increasingly being challenged.

? Strengthen the coherence between EU policies, and the co-ordination between the Commission and the Member States, and to establish monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of the strategy.

? Review and strengthen the consultation structures in forestry at both Community and national level.

The Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF), which is an umbrella federation of 23 national family forest owners associations, welcomes the required need for better coordination of forestry relevant policies and hopes the Action Plan will strengthen the European model of multifunctional forestry.

The Action Plan will be elaborated in cooperation with the Member States and stakeholders and is proposed to be presented by the Commission in 2006.

Action Plan up for Jargon Award

Agra Europe reports that the "Plain English Society" has nominated the EU Action Plan on Sustainable Forest Management for an award for the criminal use of "Euro jargon". According to this report the report contains 21 references to "strategy", 20 "implementations", 7 "stakeholders" and 6 "consultations" while the word "tree" fails to merit a single mention.

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