

# EU Forest Strategy: Strengthening forest ecosystem services and integrative forest management for biodiversity and climate change?

22nd September, 2021



The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the European Forest Institute (EFI) joined forces to organise a high-level webinar and exchange on the new EU Forest Strategy. The webinar, which took place on 22 September 2021, with support of the [SINCERE project](#) and [Integrate Network](#), was moderated by **Georg Winkel, Head of EFI's Governance Programme** and SINCERE Project Coordinator.

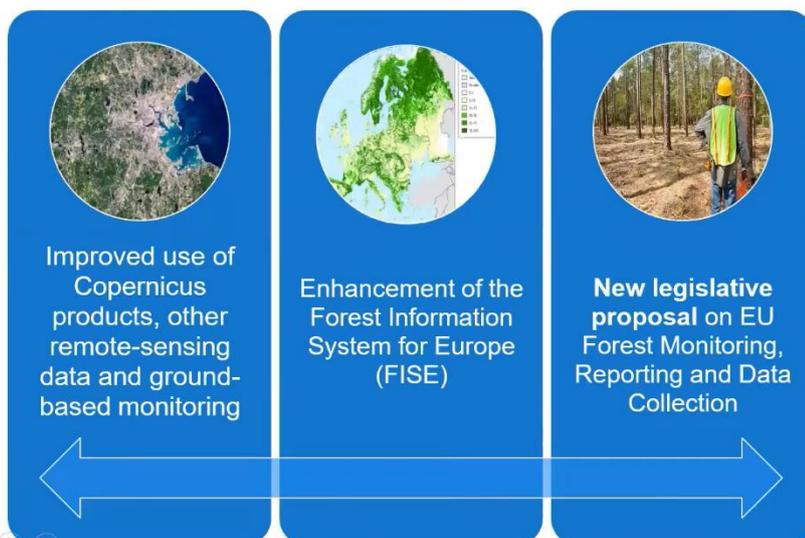
More than 200 key stakeholders interested in and contributing to the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy, reflected on the pathways for action for strengthening the important role of forests in achieving Europe's biodiversity, ecosystem services, and climate change targets.

The webinar introduced SINCERE – a H2020 project with the objective of developing Innovative Mechanisms to support the provision of forest ecosystem services – and the INTEGRATE Network – which promotes the integration of nature conservation into sustainable forest management - by **Marco Lovrić, European Forest Institute** and **Cristoph Dürr, Chair of the Integrate Network** respectively.

The new EU Forest Strategy for 2030 was introduced by **Raphaël Lelouvier, Policy Officer Forest protection and sustainable management of the European Commission, DG Environment**. The Strategy is one of the flagship initiatives of the [EU Green Deal](#) and it builds on the [2030 Biodiversity Strategy](#). It covers the whole forest cycle and promotes the many services that forests provide, ensuring that all ecosystems are restored, resilient, and adequately protected. Key objectives include: to achieve an effective afforestation, forest preservation and restoration in Europe to help to increase the absorption of CO<sub>2</sub>; to promote the bio-economy, in full respect of ecological principles favourable to biodiversity; to reduce the incidence and extent of forest fires; and to incentivize forest managers to preserve growth and manage forests sustainability. The multifunctional role of forests was highlighted as well as the contribution of foresters and the forest-based value chain for achieving a sustainable and climate-neutral economy by 2050.

According to the European Commission, key elements that can contribute to making the EU Forest Strategy a success include a strong research and innovation agenda, an inclusive and coherent EU forest governance framework, stepping-up implementation, and enforcement of the existing EU Acquis.

## Strategic forest monitoring, reporting and data collection



A panel of renowned experts from a diverse range of fields, including scientific experts, forest managers, civil society and policy-and decision-makers from across Europe, gave their first impressions on the EU Forest Strategy, highlighting the Strategy’s gaps and opportunities.

**Sabien Leemans, Senior Biodiversity Policy Officer at WWF European Policy Office** stated that “*the Forest Strategy is changing the debate on the role of forests in our society and the importance of their protection*”, but that it is incoherent in relation to climate change elements, in particular with regards to the bio-economy. According to her, a good instrument provided by the Strategy is to compare information across European forests on issues such as climate change, biodiversity and the health and management of forests is EU Forest Monitoring, Reporting and Data Collection.

**Fanny-Pomme Langué, Secretary General of the Confederation of European Private Forest Owners**, expressed concerns over the Strategy regarding a rather simplistic approach to forest management - in particular on the complexity of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), forest ecosystems, and the ownership. Further, she referred to an unbalanced approach for ecosystem services, due to a focus on biodiversity and carbon sinks, which present the bio-economy as a risk not an opportunity. Ms. Langué also pointed at the overall incoherence among the EU taxonomy, Biodiversity Strategy, and Forest Strategy discussions, which address sustainable forest management in different ways.

**Pierre Hermans, Founder and Director of Sylva Nova**, a Belgium based International Forest Consultancy focused on forest management, reforestation, and forest landscape restoration in Europe, described the Strategy as a very good overview of best practices, mentioning targets for each function of the forest: environmental, social and economic. He highlighted two key words in the strategy: “integrate” and “multifunctional”. He mentioned the challenge of combining different departments and themes together and having a real multifunctional government. He also emphasised that there is no methodology to quantify and analyse the quality of ecosystem services, nor their costs. This lack of clarity creates difficulties in explaining what ecosystem services mean to forest owners and to the private sector, who are the ultimate stewards for implementing these projects.

**Meelis Seedre, Head of the Forest Department at Estonian Ministry of the Environment** expressed his gratitude to see that many activities proposed in the Strategy are similar to the ones that the Estonian government has incorporated in its Forest Development Plan, currently being prepared by

their department. He emphasised the role of EU Member States in using their knowledge and wisdom to manage their forests and the potential of the Strategy to further incentivise governments in the management of multiple ecosystem services.

According to **Christoph Dürr, from the Federal Office for the Environment in Switzerland and Chair of the INTEGRATE Network**, the Strategy provides “*a big chance for the EU countries and the European forest and timber sector to address forest-related challenges ahead*”. He explained that the new EU Forest Strategy information system can be an added value because it helps addressing climate change, biodiversity, and bio-economy issues, while harmonising them. He mentioned that in Switzerland there is already a system of criteria and indicators at national level, the close-to-nature approach, and in Switzerland, 50% of forests have protection functions against erosion and avalanches and unsustainable practices.

The panel discussion created a space for constructive dialogue and joint reflections on the potential and the challenges of the Forest Strategy to support ecosystem services and integrate biodiversity protection into forest management, to ensure the resilience and productive capacity of European forests. During the Q&A session, panellists answered questions from the public about the EU Forest Strategy. The topics ranged from the role of the forest sector in carbon farming and the CAP, to the Forest Management Certification, for which the European Commission is still working on guidelines, and has guaranteed synergy with existing schemes.

The outcomes of the panel discussion stressed the complexity of the EU Forest Strategy and the need to take into account the differences among countries’ legislations, divergent views of key actors, and stakeholders and to implement the EU Forest Strategy outside silos. The Strategy needs an integrated and multifunctional approach in order to overcome these challenges. It was agreed that, with the publication of the Strategy, the dialogue needs to continue to ensure its implementation.

The webinar concluded with final reflections on the Strategy from IUCN and EFI.



**Chantal van Ham, Acting Director IUCN European Regional Office** stressed the essential role of forests for climate and biodiversity, as well as for health and wellbeing: forests provide habitats for more than three-quarters of the world’s species, and 50% of accessible drinking water alongside many other services we all depend on. She added that IUCN has developed an European red list of trees which found that 42% are threatened with extinction, due to climate change, invasive alien species, unsustainable logging and urban development. The European Green Deal and the EU Forest Strategy are strong foundations but a few critical aspects are to create naturally diverse forests, as many initiatives can tree planting initiatives lean on single tree species, which can be harmful and may not be optimising the economic potential. Ms van Ham called for a stronger focus on the local level of knowledge and diversity of forests, and emphasised the need for compensation for forest owners through combining climate change and biodiversity financing schemes, to integrate the role of nature in national climate change plans and to better reflect it in the recovery plans. Therefore, it is essential

to give economic value to nature, which is not integrated in GDP, and create regenerative business models and an economy for the common good. She concluded that, while the Strategy has a lot of entry points to move in this direction, political will and legally binding actions are still needed.

**Marc Palahi, Director of EFI** provided five concluding remarks:

- The climate and biodiversity crises, as well as the pandemic, are the same crisis: an economic model that has failed to value nature. What is needed is a transformation towards a nature-positive economy, which requires changing the way we measure our economy.
- We are in an era of transformation and forests need to be looked at in this context: with circular bio-economy lenses rather than linear ones. Forests are the best tool to transform our economic system.
- To unlock the transformational potential of forests, it is necessary to understand that forests are complex long-term systems. The only good approach is the long-term approach.
- The impact of climate change is going to be unprecedented. The main challenge for policy makers and scientists is to use the emerging economic traction in order to implement biodiversity measures that create resilience to climate change. Investing in biodiversity is the priority number one. Enhancing biodiversity in the long term requires forest owners and companies to take a lead, which calls for incentives.
- Forests are complex systems but we should not make them complicated. In order to avoid this, a transparent science and policy dialogue is needed.

The recording of the webinar can be accessed [here](#).

All webinar's presentations are available:

- Marko Lovrić, EFI: [Introduction to SINCERE](#)
- Christoph Durr, Chair of the Integrate Network: [European Policy Network Integrate](#)
- Raphaelle Lelouvier, European Commission DG Environment : [New EU Forest Strategy for 2030](#)