



UEAA NEWSLETTER

2024, No. 1

Nitra, January, 31, 2024

LATEST NEWS

EU and forests: an update with some reflections from the Swedish perspective

A large number of EU legislative acts that involve forests and their management have recently been adopted or are in the final part of the decision-making process. The following is an attempt to give a brief overview of the most important ones and their state of play.

The Deforestation Regulation entered into force in June 2023.

The aim of this new regulation is to guarantee that the products EU citizens consume do not contribute to deforestation or forest degradation worldwide. The main driver of these processes is the expansion of agricultural land that is linked to the production of commodities like cattle, wood, cocoa, soy, palm oil, coffee, rubber and derived products such as leather, chocolate, tyres or furniture. By promoting “deforestation free products” the regulation is expected to bring down greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity loss.

While agreeing with this overriding ambition there is a concern that the sustainability requirements for trade with forest related products could also influence the trade of wood and biomass products from EU member states, with substantial impacts on forest management.

In the case of Sweden, the situation is not clear and the government has set up a special commission to analyse the consequences. The network of Northern Sparsely populated regions in Norway, Finland and Sweden recently sent a note to the Commission expressing their concerns about possible effects on the woody biomass sector and forest owners as well as industry, pleading for flexibility in the implementation of this regulation.

EU Climate Law and Regulation on land use, land use change and forestry – LULUCF Regulation

This Regulation is part of the European Climate Law with obligations to reach climate neutrality by 2050. The land use sector encompasses the management of cropland, grassland, wetlands, forests, settlements and land use change could be afforestation, deforestation or draining of peatlands. The ambition is to enhance the carbon sinks and prevent the release of CO₂ into the atmosphere through sustainable management of agricultural and forest land as well as the use of durable harvested wood products in order to increase carbon sequestration in biomass and soils. A separate land-based net carbon removals target has been set of 310 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030. This EU wide target, which represents an increase of about 15 % compared to current levels, is to be implemented through binding net removal national targets. The national target for Sweden is quite high and might necessitate reductions in the overall logging with considerable economic consequences.

EU Nature restoration Law

This Regulation which was agreed in November 2023 is an important part of the EU Green deal and linked to the EU Commissions' biodiversity strategy. The overriding objective is to ensure that the EU fulfils its obligations according to the UN Convention on biodiversity as set out at the UN summit on biodiversity in Montreal in 2022.

Binding targets are set that require member states to put in place effective restoration measures to cover at least 20 % of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030. By 2050 measures should be in place for all ecosystems in need of restoration. This concerns ecosystems in land (agricultural, forests and urban areas), coastal, marine and freshwater habitats.

EU member states are required to develop national restoration plans. These plans should define the restoration measures required to meet the binding targets set in the law and specify the total area to be restored, as well as a timeline. The Commission will review and assess the application of the rules and their impact in 2033.

What happens next is that each member state will develop its national restoration plan during this year. This will be a crucial process that will set out more concrete targets and actions. According to the Regulation transparency is important, involving all actors.

The Swedish Academy of Forestry and Agriculture will follow this work closely to ensure that it is based on the best scientific and practical evidence.

EU Regulation on a monitoring framework for resilient European forests

The Commission put forward a proposal for this Regulation in November 2023. It will now be negotiated in the Council of Ministers as well as the European Parliament. The Regulation aims at ensuring coherent high-quality data that makes it possible to track progress towards achieving EU targets and policy objectives that concern forests including on biodiversity, climate and crisis response etc. Earth observation technologies through the constellation of the EU Copernicus satellites and other space assets would play a major role in providing data.

The KSLA has criticized this proposal rather heavily:

The added value of this costly monitoring program is not clear. There could be a huge additional cost for member states who already have well developed national forest inventories. The need for data, with which resolution and frequency has not been sufficiently analysed. The focus on remote sensing is not likely to contribute much in relation to existing initiatives. The accuracy would be limited for most forest variables. Remote sensing could be further developed but must be calibrated and supplemented with extensive ground observations. Overlap with indicators from other legislative acts might lead to confusion. Respect of data privacy is another point of concern. Cooperation with UNECE, FAO and Forest Europe which also collect forest data is necessary.

There is an opt out clause that would make it possible for member states to produce their own data, but this is rather limited and will have to be done according to specifications from the commission. Overall, quite a lot of important technical issues are supposed to be delegated to the commission with uncertain transparency and member state influence.

However, a harmonization of existing sample plot based National Forest Inventory data for a core set of key variables would be useful. Those member states who are developing NFI:s should get support from the EU.

It is possible for those academics who wish to influence these negotiations and the final outcome by contacting their governments as well as representatives in the European Parliament. The EU ministers of agriculture had a first exchange of views at their meeting in Brussels on 23 January. This was a public debate that could be followed online. It is also available after the meeting.

The negotiations in the council of ministers will start in an ad hoc group with representatives from all the member states set up for this purpose on 5 February. The Belgian presidency has the ambition to reach a common position in the council before the summer. For the European Parliament the schedule is uncertain. The final adoption requires agreement between the council and the European Parliament.