



The Common Agricultural Policy 2020, an opportunity for European foresters

In October 2011, the European Commission presented its proposals for the new regulations of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Europe for the period 2014 -2020. Besides the direct payments to farmers linked to the production of food products (First Pillar), the CAP also has the objective to preserve the environment and help develop rural areas, through its Rural Development Programme (RDP, Second Pillar). The RDP contains forest-related measures that represent the single biggest source of European financing for forestry in Europe and it is estimated that during the period 2007-2013, about 8 billion Euros were spent through those measures. The situation varies from one country to another but generally speaking it is a significant support for forestry all over Europe, sometimes integrated within national strategies, and sometimes representing the only funding available for forest owners and foresters.

The forestry measures are developed at national level and the absence of direct legal competence from the European Commission regarding forests is perceived as an impediment, preventing those measures from having a greater complementarity with other EU-level or national measures. The competition regulation (State Aid rules) is expressly perceived as having a negative effect on the application of the forest measures, especially in the case of environmental actions which in general do not have direct consequences on wood markets. Another drawback of this absence of strong legal competence at EU level is the impossibility to safeguard a certain amount of resources for the forest measures. This creates at national and regional levels strong tensions with agricultural organisations and the balance is hardly ever in favour of the foresters.

A number of regional or national scale organisations of private forest owners from 5 European member states have contributed to this article, reflecting their views on the Commission's proposals through their answer to three questions: What is your general assessment of the new regulation? What are the most important measures? What has yet to be improved?

A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED NEW REGULATION

The new regulation is largely perceived as in line with the previous one. An apparent effort to simplify the administrative structure and number of measures is welcomed, as are several adjustments within some of the measures like the advisory services (art. 15) and the investments (art. 22). The new co-operation measure (art. 36) has raised positive expectations in all interviewed organisations, as a way to support innovative processes and collaborations between foresters and forest companies.

Water, Biodiversity and local development are all mentioned as important items which must and do find support within the new measures. The stronger focus on environmental goods and services opens promising perspectives as forests provide our societies with numerous benefits that today are not corresponded by any economic compensation and are a net charge for the forest owners.





The obligation to dedicate 25% of the RDP budget to a transversal priority regarding the adaptation to climate change, along the introduction of specific forestry measures is perceived as an opportunity for forest owners and managers.

IMPORTANT MEASURES FOR EUROPEAN FORESTS, THEIR OWNERS AND PROFESSIONAL FORESTERS

Regarding competitiveness, the contributors express concern that forestry does not appear expressly within the overall objectives of the Regulation (art. 4). In order to fully support the economic dimension of forestry at local and national levels, the renewal of the investment and training measures is welcomed by all organisations, and in many cases complement other national policies or subsidies.

In this perspective, the support to producers groups – i.e. forest owners' associations (FOA), is then important for all respondents. Some countries have strong organisations and other countries are in the process of building them, but all over Europe, the high and increasing level of forest land fragmentation is seen as a problem and only through FOAs it can be effectively addressed.

The financing of Natura 2000 forested spaces has been lacking behind in the previous period and there is little indication that the situation will change, the two main problems being the excessive administrative burden and the limited budget earmarked at national levels.

Still room for improvement

The wide acceptance of forests environmental functions places foresters as producers of environmental public goods and they should be recognised as such, at all administrative levels. Funding earmarking should be encouraged at national levels for the implementation of payment systems for environmental services, in particular regarding water basin and groundwater management and peri-urban forests which are two evident cases where forests directly benefit the society.

Natural risks management is still perceived as lacking behind, when science and the experience from the last years show us that it might be a serious problem for the years to come. Catastrophic natural forest disasters have a strong impact not only on the regions where they occur but also on the wood markets of several other countries and there must be a european-level response mechanism regarding prevention and insurance which today is missing. Adaptive silviculture must be supported.

Renewable energy and in particular wood biomass does not appear as such in the proposed regulation when it is in fact a formidable tool that forests can offer to Europe in its fight against climate change. It is unfortunate that there can not be a specific forestry sub-programme but there could be on renewable energy in the rural environment, which would support a higher co financing rate for wood biomass installations for farms and public equipments of a certain size.

Nevertheless, in a context where the land becomes rare, and is at the crossing of conflicting interests and demands, those actions should be accompanied by a sensible evaluation process, to appreciate where and when the use of wood energy might harm biodiversity (on certain areas or/and through certain procedures). In parallel, the question to set up if the short rotation coppices for energy production - that forms a major part of the solid biomass potential - is part of "forestry" or rather agriculture should be clarified, and in what conditions those go along with the goals of nature protection by the EU.

Finally, in order to reduce the administrative burden, especially in the case of small payments, the use of standard scales and lump sums is welcome and should be strongly encouraged at national and regional levels. A solution to provide partial advance or interim payments would also be very welcome as the current economic situation makes it very difficult for individual owners or small organisations to obtain bank guarantees. There is a clearly negative relationship between the level of administrative burden and the involvement and commitment of private forest owners, as reported by the evaluation of forestry measures.





SOME NATIONAL SPECIFICITIES

This common core of remarks being widely shared by all the contributors, it is nevertheless worthwhile mentioning some national singularities.

Estonian forest owners express concern about the prevention and restoration of damages from natural disasters (art. 25), mentioning that conditioning the support on the submission of a forest management plan detailing the prevention objectives could jeopardize the implementation of the measure for small properties

France points out that, at national level, forest land does not increase through afforestation but natural growth in abandoned lands and this important structural change should be better taken into consideration. They ask foresters to be considered as producers of environmental goods (drinking water, landscape, clear air, etc..) on the same level as farmers, and for measures supporting the relocation of industries on the EU territory.

Besides, the co-operation measure (art. 36) would have to be detailed, so that the existing - and promising - regional plans for mobilization could be supported.

Germany (Lower Saxony and Schleswig Holstein) calls for the recognition of the important role of the forest sector in economic terms and not only environmental terms and a clarification concerning the short-rotation plantations dedicated to energy production (forestry vs agricultural productions). They also advocate a higher funding rate for environmental actions by private forest owners which benefit the society at large.

In Italy, forest owners call for support of wood multicyclic plantations, for the possibility to use the RDP to support forest certification, and underline the contradictions of the competition rules ("de minimis") acting as an obstacle to the implementation of the environmental measures.

Spanish forest organisations regret the absence of a specific forestry sub-programme which could allow higher funding rates for critical activities (Natura 2000, wood biomass support,...) and insist on a specific, earmarked financing for the prevention of forest fires, through the support to forest insurance mechanisms and adaptive silviculture.

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