



Interview: Biodiversity goals 'unachievable' without forest owners

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Gaining the support of Europe's 16 million forest owners will be vital to achieving the EU biodiversity strategy's objectives, says Fanny-Pomme Langue, secretary-general of the Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF).

The umbrella organisation of national groups represents some 16 million private owners who manage 60% of EU forests, with two thirds owning less than 3 hectares. The new EU biodiversity strategy for 2030, presented by the European Commission on 19 May, will need them as partners to succeed, Langue says. So far, however, the strategy has raised more questions than answers.

The [strategy](#) aims to create a Trans-European Nature Network protecting 30% of the EU land and sea area, a third of which would be placed under “strict” protection. The target includes the preservation of all remaining EU primary and old growth forests, as well as increasing forests’ quantity, quality and resilience to climate change threats.

But what does “strictly protected” mean? And what is the definition of “old growth forests”? Both concepts are absent from current legislation and the CEPF secretary-general worries that setting the targets before the definitions is putting the cart before the horse.

The [biodiversity strategy](#)'s other target is three billion new trees planted by 2030. Recent research in Chile and China has questioned this approach, warning that depending on how it is done, tree planting [“can do more harm than good”](#). Langué also expresses a degree of scepticism at the proposal. “We are interested to see the scientific evidence that made up this figure, to discuss where the trees will be planted, in terms of countries and land, and to see how the plan will be implemented,” she says.

Langué points out that biodiversity is only one of the three pillars of sustainable forest management, a well-established concept in EU law and national indicators. The social and economic pillars, delivering ecosystem services to society and determining harvests and revenues for the sector, respectively, also need to be considered by the strategy, in her view.

Most importantly, the three pillars have to be covered “in a holistic way” by the European Forest Strategy, which the commission will present in 2021, she says.

Compared to the current one, the new forest strategy will have to focus more on climate adaptation, according to the CEPF secretary-general. “Climate adaptation is more urgent now than it used to be a few years ago,” she says. “Our forests are suffering more intense and more frequent impacts of climate change and natural disasters, and forest owners have to make decisions to adapt management practices that will be valid in decades. It’s a very different cycle compared to agriculture,” Langué says.

The sector claims as success a 9 million hectare increase in the EU forest area in 25 years, combined with a 7 billion cubic metre increase in wood stock; 90% of the European forest trade industry is supplied with wood generated in the EU, while half of the Natura 2000 network is made of forest areas, Ms Langué notes.

Yet, a 2018 commission report on the implementation of the current strategy warns that conservation of forest habitats and species has shown “no improvement so far” and that only 26% of forest species and 15% of forest habitats of European interest are in “favourable conservation status”.

Langué argues that in forestry the results of management decisions take time to manifest. “Ten years at the timescale of forests is in fact a really short time,” she says. The past decade, she adds, has been especially challenging for forest ecosystems, as “changing climatic conditions can be almost a death sentence for organisms that are unable to move away at a fast pace”. This reinforces the call for a focus on adaptation and resilience in the coming strategy, in her view.

The next European forest strategy should also support the role of forests in climate change mitigation and CO₂ emissions reductions, Langué says.

But there is controversy over the role forests should play as a source of energy. Environmental groups have called for restrictions on the use of forest biomass for energy, while the commission’s biodiversity strategy promised an assessment of biomass supply and demand this year with new sustainability criteria guidance in 2021.

Langué, however, argues “it does not make sense, from a forest owners point of view, to manage and harvest forests for wood energy only”, as the timber market is more valuable.

In response to warnings that planned increases in wood harvesting across Europe could reduce the capacity of EU forests to [remove carbon dioxide](#) from the atmosphere by upwards of 20%, she says the accounting of forests’ climate benefits should not neglect carbon storage in wood products and the substitution of fossil-based materials with biomaterials, a market that has “developed tremendously” in the past few years.

“We should actually seek for an integrated system in which synergies between the main climate benefits are streamlined,” she says.

Overall, in recent years, the group noted an increasing number of policies affecting the sector, not always in a consistent way. With the biodiversity, forest and bioeconomy strategies among the examples, Langué says that policy coherence, “ensuring the different pillars work together and do not contradict each other”, will be a decisive factor for their success in the future.