

BRATISLAVA DECLARATION

EU Forest Strategy: a new impulse on a way forward

HAVING MET in Bratislava, the Slovak Republic from 7 to 9 November 2016;

We, the participants of the **Informal EU Forest Directors General Meeting**:

CONSIDERING the important role that forests and the forest sector play in the well-being of European society through the provision of multiple goods and services;

BEING AWARE of new challenges and growing multiple needs and demands in and beyond the forest sector in the EU Member States and globally, including for woody biomass for materials and energy, clean water, soil erosion prevention, biodiversity protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and combating desertification;

RECALLING the Council Conclusions on the new EU Forest Strategy, adopted in May 2014, stating that while the EU has a variety of forest-related policies, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union makes no reference to a common EU forest policy and responsibility for forests lies with the Member States;

STRESSING the continued need of a more coherent international framework to promote sustainable forest management, ensure multi-functionality and resilience of forests, promote trade in legally produced timber and timber products, and reverse the trend of fragmentation of international forest-related regime;

UNDERLINING a key role of forest research and innovation in supporting policy ambitions we have in relation to forest management and forest-based sector, including those related to the current challenges of bio-economy and wider green economy; and in this respect WELCOMING the new EFI Strategy 2025 “Connecting knowledge to action”;

RECALLING the recent Cork Declaration 2.0 “A Better Life in Rural Areas” and specifically SUPPORT the policy orientation included in it on the potential of forestry to deliver sustainable solutions for current and future generations, the recognition of forestry as an engine for rural growth and that foresters should be encouraged to provide climate services and to engage in climate change adaptation efforts, while EMPHASIZING the need to avoid market distortions and unfair competition in order to achieve well-functioning markets;

ACKNOWLEDGING the benefits of the EU Forest Strategy 2013 for forests and the forest-based sector in the EU as set out in the Council conclusions, and the implementation process of the strategy realized so far, including Member States initiatives;

RECALLING the Council conclusions of 28 June 2016 on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade;

RECALLING the Madrid Ministerial Decision signed by the European ministers responsible for forests at the Extraordinary FOREST EUROPE Ministerial Conference in Madrid 2015 committing themselves to explore possible ways to find common ground on a legally binding agreement on forests in Europe, and TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the current FOREST EUROPE programme of work;

REITERATE that economic viability of forestry is crucial for the existence of European forests and their sustainable management and that there is the need for full recognition of forest services and their value.

Building on current momentum and with the aim of giving a new impulse on a way forward in implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and thus meeting the broader challenges outlined above, we:

ENCOURAGE the Commission, Member States and other stakeholders to continue working on implementation of the strategy. In this regard, STRESS the role of the Standing Forestry Committee as the central coordinating body on forest related policies at the EU level;

Knowledge base supporting foresight and sound policy decisions

UNDERLINE that science, research and innovation are crucial in supporting a transition to a bio-based and circular economy, using the resources in the Horizon 2020, and underpinning policy decisions in the field of forests and forest-based industry, and play a vital role in the implementation process of the EU Forest Strategy, particularly its priority area of new and innovative forestry and added-value products, and INVITE relevant actors in the EU and Member States to make best use of synergies between the new EFI strategy 2025 and other relevant strategies, such as the Forest-based Sector Technology Platform Vision 2030 and the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda for 2020; RECOGNIZE the role of the European Forest Institute (EFI), as one of the major actors in the forest research landscape in Europe, which deserves a strong support from its members including in the field of policy-science interface. In this context, we ENCOURAGE Member States to consider possibility of supporting the Multi Donor Trust Fund;

Forests in a context of the 2030 climate and energy framework

REAFFIRM the importance of the challenges related to climate change and the role that forests and forest-based sector can play in the EU 2030 climate and energy framework;

REITERATE the relevance of the Commission's proposal for an EU Regulation on Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) for the forest and forest-based sector, in this regard STRESS the need for an ambitious and fair framework, UNDERLINE that forests and the wide range of wood-based products, including bioenergy, with its sequestration, storage and substitution effects can significantly contribute to the climate mitigation targets at national and EU level, and in this respect ARE CONVINCED that this contribution should be fully recognized, taking into account the holistic concept of sustainable forest management; UNDERLINE the need for careful analyses and thorough discussion of the LULUCF proposal, in order to ensure that the accounting methodologies applied will help to promote sustainable forest management and the use of wood products and their role in climate change mitigation;

REITERATE the principles set out in the opinion of the Standing Forestry Committee on woody biomass within the sustainable bioenergy policy in the EU post 2020 of 29 June 2016 as well as the preamble statements which highlight respect for Member States' competence in forestry, the principle of subsidiarity and the need to minimise regulatory burdens;

UNDERLINE that the potential of forests to produce sustainable biomass should be supported and further developed through enabling policy frameworks. Priority should be given to further develop the circular- and bio-economy;

Forests and biodiversity protection

ACKNOWLEDGE the Prague Declaration on Forests, signed during the Conference on „Integration of Biodiversity Enhancement in Sustainable Forest Management in the framework of EU Forestry Strategy” (Prague, 7 October 2016) in a specific context of a bilateral cooperation between the Czech Republic and Germany, as a relevant input for further joint work on this important topic in the framework of the EU Forest Strategy; WELCOME the open invitation to all Member States and the Commission to join this initiative and strengthen their collaborative work in this field thus also contributing to enhanced implementation of the CBD Strategic plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the EU Biodiversity Strategy;

FLEGT Action Plan

REAFFIRM the commitment to continue tackling the issue of illegal logging and associated trade through the EU FLEGT Action Plan;

WELCOME the upcoming start of the FLEGT licensing scheme in Indonesia on 15 November 2016 and RECOGNIZE this as an important milestone achieved in the implementation of the FLEGT Action Plan; CONGRATULATE Indonesia for its consistent efforts to combat illegal logging and related trade that have allowed it to become the first country in the world to start issuing FLEGT licences; EXPRESSES the wish that this will serve as a valuable example for other countries that have concluded FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreements with the EU;

WELCOME the progress made in negotiations with other third countries to conclude FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs), and URGE the Commission to continue this effort, while ACKNOWLEDGING the implementation challenges related to VPAs, and ENCOURAGE Member States to continue supporting this process;

RECOGNIZE progress made in implementation of the EU Timber Regulation, as well as challenges identified in the first Review of the regulation in relation to its effective and uniform application across the EU, and UNDERLINE that further efforts and adequate resources are needed from Member States to step up implementation and achieve effective and a more coherent application and enforcement of the EU Timber Regulation throughout the EU with a view to ensure a level playing field and effective controls throughout the internal market, in line with the Council conclusions from 28 June 2016;

Forests from a global perspective

UNDERLINE the importance to meet the political mandate and time line given by the Madrid Ministerial Decision from the FOREST EUROPE Extraordinary Ministerial Conference and in that context STRESS the need for timely EU preparations ahead of the FOREST EUROPE Round Table meeting in early 2018, including clarifying the EU position on the way forward;

CALL therefore on the Presidency of the Council and the Commission to take necessary steps for internal EU preparations in a reasonable time before the Round Table meeting;

STRESS the need to give a priority to international forest issues in the implementation phase of the EU Forest Strategy until 2020 and to prepare the 2018 review; INVITE the Commission to address, in the framework of the Standing Forestry Committee, the perspective of how the international dimension of the strategy and its 2020 objective can be further developed, taking into account effective implementation of the anticipated UN Strategic Plan on Forests.