

## Position Paper of European Municipal Forest Owners on the Future of EU Forest Policy

### European municipal forest owners call for subsidiarity, balance, and practical EU policies

The sustainable management of Europe's forests depends on recognising their multifunctionality—ecological, economic, social, and cultural. To implement these principles effectively, we need not only qualified forestry professionals but also continuous cross-border exchange of knowledge. This enables local conditions to be addressed properly and conflicting interests to be resolved constructively.

The Fédération Européenne des Communes Forestières (FECOF) plays a vital role by representing municipal forest owners at the European level and promoting democratic, sustainable objectives for community forests. Its members are committed to safeguarding the multifunctionality of forests—ensuring biodiversity, supporting economic development, providing recreation, and protecting against natural hazards such as floods and landslides. These functions are essential to forests that serve and connect with their communities.

Climate change is rapidly altering forest ecosystems across Europe. Municipal forest owners are prepared to meet these challenges and remain committed to sustainable management as a means of ensuring regional employment and economic growth—while safeguarding environmental integrity. The European forestry and timber sector generates €1.1 trillion in annual gross value added, equivalent to Spain's GDP, and provides 17.5 million jobs—meaning one in every sixteen jobs in Europe is directly or indirectly tied to this sector.

To continue fulfilling these responsibilities, municipal forest owners across Europe need EU regulations that are practical, balanced, and respect local realities. We therefore call for the following:

#### 1. Towards a Subsidiarity-Based and Practicable EU Forest Policy

EU forest policy must consistently uphold the principle of subsidiarity and significantly reduce bureaucratic burdens. Europe's forests are too ecologically and structurally diverse for uniform, top-down regulation. Climate adaptation strategies must be flexible and tailored to regional conditions.

Future EU legislation should be pragmatic, coherent, and economically viable. It must also consider the cross-sectoral impacts—particularly socio-economic consequences. Overly restrictive frameworks can impose disproportionate financial burdens on already climate-stressed forestry operations, often without sufficient compensation. This undermines sustainable forest management and puts rural communities at risk.

#### 2. Towards an Integrated and Evidence-Based Forest Policy

Forests provide a wide range of services—from climate protection and biodiversity to timber production, recreation, and disaster prevention. EU forest policy must reflect this complexity by integrating ecological, social, and economic perspectives equally.

However, discussions—particularly within the European Parliament's Environment Committee—often overemphasise individual goals like biodiversity, at the expense of balanced governance. This narrow approach should be reassessed in favour of more integrated, realistic forest policy.

At the same time, forestry debates have become increasingly polarised, often overshadowing facts. Some political actors rely on ideological narratives and alarmism. A return to science-based, objective policymaking is urgently needed to support sustainable, multifunctional forest management.

### **3. Strengthening Local Involvement and the Attractiveness of the Forestry Sector**

Local forest owners and forestry professionals are central to Europe's forest management. Yet, legal frameworks are often designed without their involvement. A real, partnership-based dialogue with practitioners at EU level is urgently needed.

This also requires a renewed trust in those acting on the ground—particularly municipal forest owners—who manage forests with a strong sense of responsibility toward their communities. They are directly accountable to the public, who observe and evaluate their actions with great attention. Recognising this proximity and commitment is key to empowering effective, place-based forest stewardship.

Current developments—such as the restructuring of technical committees—tend to weaken participation and increase bureaucratic burdens. Uniform regulations across member states risk excluding small-scale and municipal owners. National implementation must allow for flexible, risk-adapted solutions.

Moreover, the EU must do more to invest in training and employment in the forestry sector. Forest adaptation and protection require skilled professionals—but many graduates face uncertain job prospects. While Europe has strong regional forestry education centres, better coordination and support are needed to retain talent and ensure long-term workforce stability. With cross-border employment already common in the sector, a coordinated EU approach is essential.

### **4. A Coordinated EU Strategy Against Biotic and Abiotic Forest Risks**

Europe's forests face growing risks from both biotic (e.g. bark beetles, pathogens) and abiotic (e.g. droughts, storms, wildfires) factors. An effective EU strategy must address this full range of threats with coordinated, preventive action.

This includes investments in early warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and specialised training for emergency and forestry personnel. Member states must also intensify cross-border cooperation to ensure rapid responses to regional crises and to limit ecological and economic damages.

If these threats are not tackled proactively, the forest ecosystems that provide essential public goods—such as clean air, water retention, and carbon storage—will be at risk across Europe.

FECOF, as the representative body of municipal forest owners at the European level, strongly supports European cooperation and values the EU as a community of peace, democracy, and shared responsibility.

However, forest policy must remain within the competence of the member states. Forests are embedded in distinct national, regional, and ecological contexts and cannot be effectively managed through overly centralised, top-down legislation. The EU must respect the principle of subsidiarity

and allow countries the flexibility to design forest policies that reflect their own environmental conditions, ownership structures, and socio-economic realities.

FECOF therefore calls for a fundamental revision of EU forest policy—towards a balanced framework that supports sustainable, multifunctional forest management while removing unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. All forest ecosystem services—ecological, social, and economic—must be recognised and valued equally.

Ignoring this complexity would jeopardise forest ecosystems and place an undue burden on future generations. FECOF stands ready to contribute to a more subsidiarity-driven, balanced EU forest policy—and urges stronger inclusion of municipal forest owners in EU decision-making.