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European  
forest governance:  
issues at stake and the way forward

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This brief is based on a scientific assessment carried out in 2012–2013 in the context of the ThinkForest high-level discussion forum ([www.thinkforest.efi.int](http://www.thinkforest.efi.int)). It highlights and summarizes the policy recommendations set out in “European forest governance: issues at stake and the way forward”, published in the European Forest Institute’s What Science Can Tell Us series in 2013.

Reference to the full report:

European forest governance: Issues at stake and the way forward

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Bas Arts, Peter Mayer, Marc Palahí, Georg Winkel and  
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[www.efi.int/portal/virtual\\_library/publications/](http://www.efi.int/portal/virtual_library/publications/)



## THE CONTEXT: FOREST GOVERNANCE OSCILLATES BETWEEN POLITICS AND LAW

**Forests are the focus of different policy targets.** These include the appropriate use of wood (as solid material, bio-energy, in a cascade use etc.), conservation and nature protection as well as climate change adaptation and mitigation. As a result, there are trade-offs among targets and objectives at the inter-sectoral or regional level and within the actual forest area.

**EU forest policy-making has shifted** from only focusing on agriculture and trade issues towards also addressing biodiversity, climate change and energy.

**International ideas, rules and norms have an impact** on EU forest policy and the pan-European FOREST EUROPE process. However, the scattered international legal landscape and flexibility in implementation risks increasing inconsistency and incoherence within Europe.



Maslov Dmitry / Fotolia



## ACHIEVEMENTS IN FOREST GOVERNANCE

### **A de-facto EU forest policy exists**

Although there is no single competence for forests within EU primary law, over time a dense regulatory network has developed, comprising different forest-focused and forest-related policies.

### **The pan-European level has contributed substantially to forest policy-making**

In particular it has defined sustainable forest management (SFM) and developed criteria and indicators for SFM. The FOREST EUROPE process has developed its own well-recognised identity. FOREST EUROPE's policies also serve as a response to international action and as a basis for developing EU policy instruments.

### **European forest governance is cross-sectoral by nature**

Within the EU, the establishment of coordinating committees as well as formal and informal forest-related forums is a sign of progress for EU forest policy-making, as information-sharing is better co-ordinated. Several cross-sectoral coordinating actions have also taken place in the FOREST EUROPE process.

## EUROPEAN FOREST GOVERNANCE FACES 5 CHALLENGES

### **1. Forest policies within the EU lack coordination and coherence, while policy objectives expand**

Forest-focused policies are much less institutionalised at the EU level than in many Member States. They are largely voluntary (eg the Forestry Strategy and Forest Action Plan) and therefore simply too weak to improve coordination or coherence. The handling of forest-related issues in different sectors results in a fragmented regulatory approach to forests.

### **2. EU policy goals for forest policy-making are inconsistent**

Establishing a coherent set of regulation(s) – or an appropriate coherent legal framework – which takes account of resource limits and potential trade-offs between different resource uses is still a largely unresolved issue in the EU. Different EU forest-related policies pursue distinct and, in parts, contradictory ideas of what forests actually constitute, and how they need to be managed. As a result, they have established partially competing objectives and targets.



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### **3. Competence for developing a comprehensive international EU forest-focused strategy is missing**

The internal, piecemeal approach used so far does not lead to an EU external legal competence for forests. This constrains the EU's ability to act with one voice, and weakens its negotiating power in the international arena.

### **4. Mechanisms for representation and participation in policy-making are lacking**

The participation of private and societal actors is essential for good governance, but is a challenge for pan-European forest policy-making and democracy. Different practices exist, but stakeholders' participation tends to be more and more restricted to the informal sphere. In addition, there is weak leverage in other sectors.

### **5. Deficits in national implementation**

The implementation of voluntary pan-European forest-focused policy instruments is weak.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Governance approaches

There are three main approaches to European forest governance, from legal to voluntary.

1. Governance by legislation follows the traditional model.
2. Governance by cooperation, based mainly on the cooperation of national legislators, gives priority to information sharing, but also seeks to influence national forest legislation.
3. Governance by 'soft modes' is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but emphasises participation.

Governance by legislation	Governance by cooperation	Governance by soft modes
a. Inclusion of forest chapter in the Treaty of the EU	e. Interparliamentarian cooperation (EU)	f. Open method of coordination
b. Community method (framework directive EU)		g. Civil fora
c. Enhanced cooperation (EU)		h. Collaborative policy dialogue
d. Legally binding agreement for forests (pan-Europe)		i. Devolution to the sub-national
		j. Landscape approach
		k. Non-legally binding international forest strategy

## ACTION SCENARIOS FOR EUROPEAN FOREST GOVERNANCE

Based on the three approaches, three action scenarios emerge for European forest governance. Each is a possible trajectory for how forest governance in the EU or pan-European area can be further developed to **effectively recognise potential trade-offs between different forest uses**, and to **define shared European goals across forest-related sectors**.

	EU level	Pan-European level
Legalistic scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Treaty revision procedure to include forest competence in EU primary law and new policy instrument</li> <li>b) Enhanced cooperation</li> </ul>	Legally binding forest agreement and combination of compliance mechanisms
Soft mode scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Open method of coordination (top-down) and inter-parliamentarian cooperation</li> <li>b) Open method of coordination and bottom-up forms of deliberative governance at (cross-border) forested landscape levels</li> </ul>	Slightly modified version of the open method of coordination and bottom-up forms of deliberative governance
Mixed mode scenario	Forest framework directive that includes deliberative and bottom-up approach and creation of a framework for existing EU forest-related legislation and development of international forest strategy	Legally binding forest agreement and continuation of FOREST EUROPE

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*There is a growing need to strengthen communication between the science community and key policy makers in the EU. For this reason, the European Forest Institute (EFI), after consultation with leading experts on forest policy in Europe, is supporting and facilitating a high-level discussion and information-sharing forum, “ThinkForest”.*

*ThinkForest provides an active and efficient science-policy interface and fosters an inspiring and dynamic science-policy dialogue on strategic forest-related issues.*

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