



FOREST RESTORATION POLICY IN THE NETHERLANDS

POLICY COHERENCE ACROSS FOREST-RELATED POLICY AREAS AND POLITICAL LEVELS



SUPERB
Upscaling Forest Restoration



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forest policy in Europe operates within a complex, multi-sectoral and multi-level policy framework. To effectively implement and scale up forest restoration efforts—such as those outlined in the EU Nature Restoration Law (EU-NRL)—achieving a certain level of coherence across forest-related policy areas (e.g., nature conservation, climate, agriculture, and rural development) and political levels (EU and national/subnational) is essential.

As part of the EU Horizon 2020 SUPERB project, Task 5.1 of Work Package 5 offers valuable insights into the issue of forest restoration policy coherence. Specifically, it examines coherence at the national level across forest-related policy areas (horizontal coherence) and across national and EU levels (vertical coherence). The analysis of horizontal coherence is based on a survey of national forest policy experts in the relevant countries, while the vertical coherence analysis involves a detailed review of EU forest restoration policies and regulations, as well as national forest regulatory frameworks.

This report provides a brief overview of the key findings for **the Netherlands**, where forest policy is strongly integrated into environmental policy.



HORIZONTAL FOREST RESTORATION POLICY COHERENCE IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, the Law on Nature Conservation (Wet Natuurbescherming), which replaced the previous 1961 Forest Law (Boswet) in 2017, constitutes the key legal document for forest restoration and biodiversity conservation. It provides a cross-sectoral policy for both nature conservation and forestry, with the overarching goals of protecting Dutch nature, plants, and animals, including the conservation of forests and woodlands.

Until 2020, clearcutting up to 2 ha was legally permitted in the Netherlands, but it had to be reported in advance to the provincial authorities. The law also mandates that all types of forest owners must reforest cleared areas and open areas following salvage loggings within three years of the final harvest. However, with the implementation of the new non-legally binding National Forest Strategy for 2030 (2020 Bos voor de Toekomst), which promotes close-to-nature forest management practices and specifies the role of forests in achieving the climate objectives outlined in the 2019 Climate Act (Klimaatakkoord), a restriction on clearcutting areas to a maximum of 0.5 ha, with exceptions in cases of force majeure (such as bark beetle infestations), has been introduced. The strategy also aims to reforest and afforest 37,000 ha by 2030 to compensate for clearcutting practices and improve habitat types in Natura 2000 areas.

A key national subsidy scheme for forest restoration and nature protection is the Subsidy for Nature and Landscape (Subsidieregeling Natuur en Landschap), which assigns forests within the National Ecological Network (NNN) and the Provincial Ecological Network to specific forest types (e.g., nature types or production types) that must meet specific conditions. Forest owners receive subsidies for the management of protected forest areas to stimulate their conservation. Regional programs, such as the Subsidy Scheme Nature North Brabant (Subsidieregeling Natuur Noord Brabant), further complement national subsidy schemes by subsidizing management practices aimed at enhancing biodiversity, such as improving habitat for selected species (including tree species) and forest rehabilitation.

During the policy analysis, multiple cross-sectoral interlinkages and political synergies were identified. For example, the national forest strategy for 2030 strongly references the objectives and instruments formulated in the Law on Nature Conservation and the Climate Act, with the latter aiming to reduce CO₂ emissions by 49% compared to 1990 levels. Regarding the spatial protection of forests, two key laws have been identified: The Law on



Nature Conservation (Wet Natuurbescherming) and the Spatial Planning Act (Wet Ruimtelijke Ordening). While there may be some legal overlaps, the main differentiation is that the Law on Nature Conservation implements the Natura 2000 regulations as formulated in the EU Habitat Directive, whereas the Spatial Planning Act regulates the protection of all forests within the National Ecological Network. To simplify the partly complex and convoluted legislation, the Dutch government plans to incorporate key environmental legislation, including multiple soft policies, into an overarching Environment Act (Omgevingswet).

Dutch policies largely align with European legislation. For example, the recommendation to prioritize native species in reforestation and afforestation measures, as outlined in the Commission's Forest Strategy for 2030 and the related Guidelines on Biodiversity-Friendly Afforestation, Reforestation, and Tree Planting, is also reflected in the national forest strategy for 2030.

One significant societal and environmental obstacle to large-scale forest restoration in the Netherlands is excessive nitrogen deposition from the dominant agricultural sector. Its detrimental effects on nutrient-poor land present a critical barrier to the implementation of restoration sites and the quality of already protected areas (e.g., Natura 2000 sites). In response, the new Nitrogen Law, which came into force in 2020, formulates critical deposition values for sensitive Natura 2000 sites and provides a total budget of €2 billion for the agricultural sector to finance buy-out programs, innovation, and technical measures to reduce nitrogen emissions. The increasing nitrogen inputs have sparked heated debates about the need for changes in land use (especially intensified agricultural use) and industrial sectors. This societal agitation is reflected in the recent significant electoral gains of the Farmer Citizen Movement (Boer Burger Beweging), a political party that questions the detrimental effects of nitrogen and slows down the process of nature and forest restoration.

Table 1: Key forest restoration policies and legislation in the Netherlands.

Name	In force since	URL
Environment Act (Omgevingswet)	2024	https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/omgevingswet
National Forest Strategy for 2030 (2020 Bos voor de Toekomst)	2020	https://open.overheid.nl/document/ronl-d6ac7db2-od36-45bo-9507-f76638a48cod/pdf
2019 Climate Act (Klimaatakkoord)	2019	https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/klimaatverandering/klimaatakkoord/wat-is-het-klimaatakkoord
Subsidy for Nature and Landscape (Subsidieregeling Natuur- en Landschapsbeheer)	2021	https://lokaleregelgeving.overheid.nl/CVDR36560
Law on Nature Conservation (Wet Natuurbescherming)	2021	https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0037552/2021-07-01

VERTICAL FOREST RESTORATION POLICY COHERENCE

The provisions of the Dutch Environment Act related to forest protection and forest set-asides are explicit in several articles. Article 2.18 establishes the provincial responsibility for the conservation and restoration of natural species and habitats, in line with international guidelines such as the Habitats Directive, applicable to Natura 2000 areas, which stipulates the protection of forest areas. Article 2.19 assigns the minister the responsibility to ensure conservation measures in these areas and in special natural reserves, which is also explicit in forest protection. Article 2.31a sets mandatory rules for the protection and restoration of Natura 2000 sites and special national natural areas, directly supporting forest protection commitments. Article 2.15a addresses nitrogen deposition and has an indirect relationship with the conservation of sensitive habitats in Natura 2000, although it does not specifically focus on forest protection.

Likewise, Article 2.44 explicitly designates Natura 2000 areas to comply with the EU Birds and Habitats Directives, sets conservation objectives and specifies the designation of national parks and other natural areas under the Dutch Nature Network. Article 4.3 establishes rules prohibiting activities that could significantly deteriorate or disturb Natura 2000 sites, as well as the felling and management of timber stands aimed at preserving forest cover and protecting nature, as outlined in Article 4.35. Article 4.30 reinforces the implementation of rules to prevent disruptive impacts on protected (forest) areas, while Article 5.1 mandates environmental permits for activities within these zones, further strengthening their protection. Regarding habitat conservation and invasive species control, Article 4.3 also regulates the introduction and spread of alien species that could have a negative impact on ecosystems and the native flora and fauna. Additionally, Article 5.29 ensures that any activities related to flora and fauna within Natura 2000 areas are subject to strict protection regulations. Finally, Article 10.10b obliges land and forest owners to tolerate necessary actions that align with conservation objectives in protected areas.

The provisions of the Dutch Environment Act related to uneven-aged and mixed-species forest management are implicit rather than explicit in several articles. Article 4.35, which ensures replanting following final and salvage cuttings in a silvicultural responsible manner, indirectly supports the establishment of structurally diverse and mixed-species forests. Article 4.34 and Article 2.18 focus on preventing and controlling invasive alien species, which,



can contribute to the protection of biodiversity and reduce competitive pressures on native tree species. Article 10.29 allows measures to control populations of alien species, indirectly favoring forest management that promotes native species diversity. It must be noted that Articles 2.19 and 2.18 primarily focus on controlling invasive species, which, while relevant for the protection forest health, do not explicitly promote the core aspects of uneven-aged or mixed-species forest management, such as age structures or tree species diversity.

Clearcutting and the obligation to subsequently replant or restore the forest is regulated in the Law on Nature Conservation (Wet Natuurbescherming), which as of 2017 replaced the previous 1961 Forest Law (Boswet). Special rules apply to Natura 2000 areas, where clearcuts without reforestation may be allowed to favour endangered species, although the forest area lost due to such conversion measures should be compensated by afforestation elsewhere. Until 2020, clearcutting up to 2 ha was legally permitted in the Netherlands but had to be registered in advance with the provincial authorities. With the implementation of a new national forest strategy in 2021, the emphasis is now on small-scale forest management that explicitly accounts for biodiversity conservation and clearcutting is restricted to areas of less than 0.5 ha. Larger clearcuts require special permission from the provincial authorities, which may be granted because of natural disasters such as bark beetle outbreaks in Norway spruce or Ash dieback. Shelterwood cuttings, where a large part of the old stand is retained until regeneration is at least several meters high, is allowed up to 2 ha.

The provisions of the Dutch Environment Act that relate to forest bird management are both explicit and implicit. Article 2.19 explicitly supports the conservation of bird species by mandating the creation of red lists that identify endangered species, including forest birds. Article 2.26, Article 2.31a, and Article 2.44 explicitly refer to the Birds Directive, ensuring the designation and protection of natural areas under this directive, which directly aligns with the conservation of forest bird habitats. Article 8.1 addresses fauna management plans, which implicitly support forest bird protection and conservation by establishing sustainable wildlife management practices. Article 8.3 on hunting regulations does not explicitly address forest birds but may indirectly protect certain bird species by regulating hunting practices. Lastly, Article 20.18 explicitly promotes scientific research on birds, reinforcing the commitment to forest bird conservation. The Annex to Article 1.1 further defines the Birds Directive (Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and Council of 30 November 2009) as the legal framework for wild bird conservation across Europe, cementing the importance of these provisions in forest bird protection.

KEY FINDINGS

In the Netherlands, forest policy is strongly integrated into environmental policy, taking up numerous key indicators and practices of forest restoration. While this represents an advantageous starting point for national implementation of forest restoration, increasing political movements against environmental protection measures may pose a threat to forest restoration implementation and upscaling in the years to come.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the successful implementation and scaling of forest restoration, it is essential to leverage synergies across forest-related policy areas while addressing key trade-offs. This can be achieved by better aligning economic interests with nature conservation goals and strengthening law enforcement.

