EU FOREST RESTORATION POLICY

COHERENCE ASSESSMENT ACROSS POLICY AREAS

SUPERB
Upscaling Forest Restoration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EU policy actions that have an impact on forest landscapes are primarily associated with other foret-related policy areas. At the EU level, forest issues are torn between different sectoral interests whenever new targets evolve outside the forest sector. Here, we first provide an overview of some key EU sectoral policies and instruments that are directly and indirectly related to forest (biodiversity) restoration and that are therefore relevant to be coordinated with EU and national forest policy and forest management in a coherent way. These forest-related policy areas often seek to influence forest management at the forest stand, management unit and landscape level in line with their sectoral perspectives. Second, based on an expert assessment, we provide results from a cross-sectoral forest restoration policy coherence assessment at EU level, confronting key EU forest restoration objectives and indicators with the overarching policy goals of related policy areas.

Our findings indicate that while numerous sectoral policies influence forest policy and management across different EU Member States (MS), the majority of instruments originates from nature conservation policy, where the EU and MS share legislative competence. Notably, the recently enacted Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) introduces strong, legally binding, and directly applicable provisions for forest management across MS.

Results from the expert assessment of cross-sectoral forest policy coherence indicate that forest restoration objectives and indicators generally align with climate policy, nature conservation policy, and water policy goals. However, trade-offs are perceived between restoration efforts and bio economy and energy policies, while rural development outcomes appear more mixed.

The successful implementation of the EU forest restoration policy in the coming years, particularly under the recently enacted NRR, will critically depend on leveraging synergies, addressing potential trade-offs across related policy areas, and effectively balancing the diverse interests of stakeholders involved in forest restoration policy and practice.

KEY FINDINGS

EU forest and nature conservation regulatory policies and strategies

The two cornerstones of EU nature conservation policy are the Birds Directive adopted in 1979 and the Habitats Directive adopted in 1992. The key instrument to meet their biodiversity conservation and restoration objectives is the establishment and management of an EU-wide network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), called Natura 2000. While strict reserves are included, the larger part of Natura 2000 sites are managed sites. Over half of all Natura 2000 sites are forest areas, accounting for 23% of the total forest area of the EU-28.

Another crucial component of the EU nature conservation and restoration policy was the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2020. It promoted a mix of measures such as conservation and restoration of forest habitats and species, integration of biodiversity concerns into forest management plans, and funding and monitoring to improve biodiversity through Sustainable Forest Management (SFM). However, the 2015 Mid-Term Review of the Strategy found no significant progress towards those objectives. One reason for this might be the ineffectiveness of conservation and biodiversity restoration policy due to cross-sectoral policy incoherence and corresponding implementation challenges that can be observed in almost all EU-27 countries. The domestic implementation of the integrative approach of the Natura 2000 network through conservation sites (for habitats and species conservation) proved to be a lengthy and politically controversial process.

In 2019, the then newly appointed EC adopted a Communication on the European Green Deal, where forest protection, including forest ecosystem restoration, is deemed a political priority in pursuing the new EU's policy objectives in climate policy (55% green-house gas emission reduction by 2030) and biodiversity policy (nature protection of 30% of the EU land area, incl. 10% under strict nature protection by 2030). The EU Green Deal, together with the EU Climate Law, the new EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 (EU-BS) and the new EU Forest Strategy to 2030 (EU-FS) call for a transformative process of change aiming at tackling the biodiversity and climate crisis in an integrated way. These EU policies recognize that forest ecosystems are under increasing pressure and call for action to improve the quantity and quality of the forests for the EU and its Member States to reach climate neutrality by 2050 and a healthy environment by 2030 (Sotirov et al., 2024).

The new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (EU-BS), adopted in 2020, sets out three key objectives and explicit targets to be reached until 2030, namely (i) to legally protect at least 30% of EU land area, (ii) to strictly protect at least a third of the EU's protected areas representing 10% of EU land, including all remaining EU primary and old-growth forests, and to (iii) effectively manage all protected areas, defining clear conservation objectives and measures, and monitoring them appropriately. The new EU-BS contains a chapter on actions on forests, requiring the strict protection of all remaining EU primary and old-growth forests and increasing the forested area by planting at least 3 billion additional trees in the EU by 2030. The latter goals also being integrated in the recently enacted NRR under Article 13. To further support this ambitious endeavor the EC has published Guidelines for Defining, Mapping, Monitoring and Strictly Protecting EU Primary and Old-Growth Forests and Guidelines on Biodiversity-Friendly Afforestation, Reforestation and Tree Planting in 2023.

Another key policy initiative for forest restoration is the EU-FS for 2030. The main objectives of the Strategy are (i) effective forest preservation and restoration in Europe, to foster the sequestration of atmospheric CO_2 thereby contributing to carbon neutrality objectives as formulated in the EGD, (ii) to reduce the incidence and extent of forest fires and (iii) to promote the sustainability of forest-based bio economy in full respect for ecological principles favorable to biodiversity. In line with the new EU-BS, it aims at strictly protecting primary and old-growth forests in the EU and further demands that clearcutting practices in the EU-MS should be approached with caution, generally avoided and used only in duly justified cases, for example when necessary for environmental or ecosystem health reasons, and include environmental and ecosystem concerns. The new EU-FS represents insofar a fundamental difference to the previous EU forest strategies in that the protection and promotion of forest biodiversity appears to be prioritized to economic forest policy objectives.

EU rural development funding policies

Beyond the project-based EU funding scheme under the LIFE+ instrument for the environment, potential EU-level funding for forest restoration and conservation is provided by the EU Rural Development Policy (RDP) as part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) adopted already in 1962. Following an integrated approach, the RDP provides funding for forestry measures including compensation payments for landowners and forest managers for the costs associated with the implementation of conservation measures such as in form of designated Natura 2000 sites in (managed) forests. However, research shows that different factors related to implementation (particularly the short time horizon for planning and monitoring) prevents the use of these funding opportunities for biodiversity conservation and forest restoration measures (de Buren et al., 2016), and that countries tend to prioritize competitiveness of the agricultural and forest sectors rather than biodiversity conservation and restoration in their allocation of the available resources (Sarvašová et al. 2017; Alliance Environment 2017; Sarvašová et al. 2018; Weiss et al. 2017). In addition, the latest CAP reform and the funding amount dedicated to rural development measures, including forestry measures, hardly reflect ambitious forest biodiversity and climate objectives such as formulated under the EU Forest and Biodiversity Strategies for 2030 (Fleckenstein, 2024).

To date, no data exists to quantify the biodiversity protection and restoration effects of forest management practices supported by EU rural development funds (Alliance Environment, 2017). This situation results in a funding gap that is not filled sufficiently by existing national or alternative funding sources in multiple EU-MS. For the EU programming period 2014–2020, for example, there were two restoration-related financial measures from RDP available: one specifically for Natura 2000 forest areas (M12.2) and another one for forest protection and the provision of forest ecosystem services (M15). However, by the end of 2017, M12.2 had been chosen to be implemented in only 10 EU Member States. It remains to be seen which forest (biodiversity) restoration and adaptation-related measures are adopted and implemented by the Member States in the current programming period (2023-2027) and to what extent.

Overview of key sectoral EU policies and instruments related to forest (biodiversity) restoration.

Policy area	Policies and instruments	
	Legally binding	Non-legally binding
Nature conservation (including forest policy)	• Birds Directive (1979/ 2009) • Habitats Directive (1992) • NATURA 2000 • EU Nature Restoration Law (2024) • Plant Health Regulation (2016) • Plant Protection Products Regulations (2009) • Forest Reproductive Material Regulation (1999) • Deforestation-Free Products Regulation (2023) • Invasive Alien Species Regulation (2014)	• 8th Environment Programme (2022) • Natura 2000 and Forest Guidance Document (2015) • Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (2019) • 3 Billion Tree Planting Roadmap (2020) • EU Forest Strategy for 2030 (2021) • Guidelines on Biodiversity-Friendly Afforestation, Reforestation and Tree Planting (2023) • Guidelines for Defining, Mapping, Monitoring and Strictly Protecting EU Primary and Old-Growth Forests (2023)
Agriculture and rural development	• CAP REGULATION on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (2013) • CAP Horizontal Regulation (2021) • CAP Strategic Plan Regulation (2021)	• LIFE+ Programme (1992) • EIP-AGRI Network (2012) • Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) • Long-term vision for rural areas (2020)
Climate	• EU Climate Law (2021) • LULUCF Regulation (2014, 2022)	• 2030 Climate Target Plan (2020) • 2030 Climate and Energy Framework (2020) • Carbon Farming Initiative (2021)
Energy	• Renewable Energy Directive (2022)	• European Energy Efficiency Plan 2020 (2011) • Renewable Energy Road Map (2007) • EU Biomass Action Plan (2005)
Finance	• EU Taxonomy Regulation (2020)	• Renewed Sustainable Finance Strategy (2021)

Expert assessment

Results from the expert assessment on EU forest restoration policy coherence are depicted in the table below. It shows that experts perceive the strongest synergies between forest restoration objectives and nature conservation and climate policy objectives as formulated in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the EU Climate Law (dark blue shades). This does not come as a surprise since with the adoption of the European Green Deal, EU forest policy objectives appear to have shifted from an economic-centered to a more climate- and biodiversity-centered approach. Moreover, findings confirm some observations from the EU level policy analysis described above.

Expert assessment on cross-sectoral forest restoration policy coherence. The darker the shade of blue (positive numbers) the stronger the perceived synergies between forest restoration objectives and forest-related sectoral policy goals. The darker the shade of red (negative numbers) the stronger the perceived trade-offs.

	CLIMATE POLICY	RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY	NATURE CONSERVATION POLICY	BIOECONOMY POLICY	WATER POLICY	ENERGY POLICY
Forest-related policy objectives / Forest restoration objectives	**Reach net carbon removals target of 310 million tons of CO_2 equivalent by 2030**	**Strengthening the socio-economic fabric of rural areas**	**Enable the long-term and sustained recovery of biodiverse and resilient nature**	**Reduce dependence on non-renewable, unsustainable resources**	**Combat water pollution and ensure sufficient water supply to flora and fauna and human needs**	**Increase the share of energy produced from renewable sources to at least 42.5% until 2030**
O[1]: Increase the share of standing and lying **deadwood**	0,30	-0,24	1,21	-0,48	0,55	-0,68
O[2]: Increase the share of **uneven-aged forests** (incl. through natural regeneration)	0,91	0,55	1,56	0,24	1,00	0,06
O[3]: Improve **forest connectivity**	0,97	0,73	1,30	0,53	1,09	0,26
O[4]: Increase the stock **of organic carbon in forests**	1,41	0,15	0,94	0,12	0,66	-0,21
O[5]: Foster strict **forest conservation** (in particular of primary and old-growth forests)	0,47	-0,52	1,03	-0,70	0,74	-0,76
O[6]: Foster **afforestation (e.g. through planting at least three billion trees in Europe by 2030)**	1,38	0,79	0,71	1,18	1,00	1,06
O[7]: Avoidance of **clearcutting**	0,44	-0,22	0,62	-0,27	0,70	-0,79
O[8]: Combat **invasive (alien) species**	0,33	0,53	1,18	0,18	0,42	0,18
O[9]: Ensure **adapted cloven-hoofed game populations** in forests	0,45	0,77	1,17	0,33	0,47	0,39

Forest restoration experts perceive the strongest trade-offs (dark red shades) between forest restoration objectives and those formulated under (renewable) energy policy. In this context, an avoidance of clearcutting practices as advocated under the new EU Forest Strategy for 2030 and an enhancement of strict forest conservation (in particular of primary and old-growth forests) proclaimed in the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, are expected to hamper (renewable) energy policy ambitions in reaching an increase in the share of energy produced from renewable sources to at least 42.5% until 2030 as formulated under the Renewable Energy Directive. Similarly, restoration-related objectives to enhance strict forest conservation and to increase the share of standing and lying deadwood in forest ecosystems are expected to be in conflict with the overarching goal of the EU Bioeconomy Strategy to reduce dependence on non-renewable, unsustainable resources in the EU.

In conclusion, the findings from the cross-sectoral policy analysis show a mixed picture on the cross-sectoral coherence of forest restoration-related policies at EU level. While some EU forest-related policy instruments, such as the Renewable Energy Directive and in parts the EU Bioeconomy Strategy promote an increase in timber harvests and wood use for sustainable development and climate change mitigation purposes, other sectoral policies such as the LULUCF Regulation and the EU Forest and Biodiversity Strategies for 2030 appear to promote a more extensive management of European forests to increase standing carbon stocks and promote forest biodiversity. These partly conflicting sectoral orientations towards forest and their management may result in policy trade-offs regarding striven forest restoration goals and promoted indicators under the EU-NRL. The challenge for EU policymakers in the years to come will be to harmonize sectoral forest-related policy instruments according to forest (biodiversity) restoration goals and to avoid potential trade-offs between policy areas that could hamper the implementation of forest restoration measures such as under the NRR.

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 showcasing best practices where forest restoration and economic development complement each other.

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