Dear President von der Leyen, dear President Metsola, dear President Michel.

We, the undersigned, wish to express our deep concern regarding the “Scientist Letter on the need for climate smart forest management” sent to you on October 27th, signed by 500 persons connected to various institutions for research and higher education in the European Union. In the letter it is erroneously argued that “increasing the share of EU-forests under protection is not suitable to support Europe's climate protection policy” and “has no further benefits for biodiversity”. These statements reveal that the authors of the letter are either unaware of, or even purposefully deny, fundamental and well-known facts about the role and importance of restoring and protecting forest ecosystems for climate and biodiversity.

The IPCC concludes that “Safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems is fundamental to climate resilient development, in light of the threats climate change poses to them and their roles in adaptation and mitigation (very high confidence).” [1]. Again, according to the IPCC, 30-50% of land and oceans need to be restored and protected to ensure the continued functioning and integrity (ref. 1, p. 32) of species and ecosystem services.

The authors of the letter seem to have misunderstood the concept of carbon debt, and confuse carbon stocks with carbon flows. Forests are important for mitigating climate change not because of the speed of carbon uptake as the trees grow, but because of the amount of carbon that is already stored in living biomass, dead biomass and, particularly in boreal forests, in soil [2]. Harvesting reduces the amount of stored carbon and therefore increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Any claim of the contrary is simply wrong and is an expression of either ignorance or sowing doubt with the purpose to protect business interests. It is common practice for some industries to engage researchers in this manner, as pointed out by Tomas Valetti, the former Chief Competition Economist of the European Commission [3].

Although carbon uptake is faster in managed forests or timber plantations than in natural forests, even natural forests continue to accumulate carbon [4]. In contrast, managed forests have a much lower carbon stock, because approximately half of the carbon that could be stored in a mature forest, is in the atmosphere instead. All carbon uptake in managed forest is therefore a payback of the historical carbon debt.

It is correct that wood products store carbon for some time, but this does not mean that the amount of carbon stored away from the atmosphere increases if trees are cut down and turned into wood products. In particular because only a small fraction (about 10% in Sweden, for instance [5]) of trees felled ends up in wood products, the remainder becoming energy, pulp products or are left as residues, all of which shortly return their carbon stocks to the
atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide after burning or decomposition. State-of-the-art models show that a quick decrease of harvesting yields the largest climate benefits [6].

The facts regarding biodiversity are equally simple: The lack of old trees, dead trees, and decaying wood in forests managed for timber production make them unsuitable for a large portion of the flora, fauna and funga of natural forests. The lack of biodiversity is also what makes the trees susceptible to outbreaks of insects whose natural predators are not present at natural levels in the monoculture timber plantations that have replaced natural forests over vast expansions in Europe.

Protection and restoration of natural forests is beneficial both for the climate and for biodiversity [1]. Therefore, there is a trade-off between, on one hand, conservation of biodiversity and addressing climate change and, on the other hand, the short-term economic gain provided by logging. We, the undersigned, think that the former should prevail. Therefore, we urge the commission to take immediate steps to drastically reduce logging throughout the EU.

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Further reading


