



HOUSE OF LORDS
European Union Committee

House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

Tel: 020 7219 6083
Fax: 020 7219 6715
euclords@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk/lords

Dan Rogerson MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Water, Forestry,
Rural Affairs and Resource Management
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

8 May 2014

**13834/13: Communication from the Commission – A new EU Forests Strategy:
for forests and the forest-based sector**

We were grateful for the oral evidence that you gave to us on 2 April on the above topic, supported by Forestry Commission and Defra officials. As you are aware, we also took oral evidence from UK practitioners, EU representative groups and the European Commission.

We have set out below our reflections based on the comments expressed to us during those sessions.

Principles and vision

Forestry is a challenging policy area for discussion at the EU level. On the one hand, the EU has no formal competence to act. On the other hand, it legislates on a range of issues that impact significantly upon forestry.

We detect an ongoing, and as yet unresolved, attempt to wrestle with this tension. The EU Forestry Strategy is helpful in setting out a short-term approach to supporting the delivery of sustainable forest management across the EU. It does not help, though, to set a longer-term vision for a sector and a habitat which is unique in the timeframe over which it is managed. In our view, the development of a consensus on a longer-term vision for forestry and what is required from EU policies to deliver that vision is essential before design of a reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), along with further review of the EU's MFF in 2017.

Ultimately, whatever vision is adopted at the EU level, it must be underpinned by the principle that one size does not fit all as regards forestry and woodland management across the EU.

Governance

The issue of competence affects the governance of forestry and results in a lack of leadership. The European Commission considers any policy incoherence to be the fault of the Member States, and the UK Government consider that the European Commission itself could do more to ensure the coherence of policy. These differences of opinion are indicative of a failure of cooperation.

We were told by the European Commission that, internally, it has had a permanent inter-services working group on forestry since 2001. This meets regularly to discuss issues of common interest and new initiatives. We would welcome any observations that you may have on that group and any suggestions that you may have to improve its effectiveness.

We agree largely with the approach to governance taken by the European Commission in its strategy, with the suggestion that the role of the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC), involving technical experts from around the EU, be enhanced. You were also keen to emphasise the role of the SFC.

We were interested to note that the SFC has issued a very limited number of publicly-available opinions in recent years. It is clear that, if the role of the Committee is to be enhanced, a step change is required. If it is the case that Member States and the Commission both see the SFC as playing a pivotal role in coordinating policies across the European Commission and across the European Union, the SFC itself must be significantly more active. We would therefore find it helpful if you could set out for us in more detail, ideally with examples, how you see a strengthened role for the SFC working in reality.

The lack of leadership over EU forestry is exacerbated by the separate, but linked, ForestEurope process. While it is clearly welcome to engage countries beyond the EU in the development of sustainable forestry management, there is a clear danger that the EU waits for ForestEurope for direction rather than taking forward its own vision in parallel.

Finally, in the context of governance, we remain confused as to the allocation of responsibility within the UK. Part of the challenge in relation to EU forestry policy is to ensure that policies across all areas are aligned and do not create unintended consequences for forestry. It was not clear to us how a UK Government negotiating strategy on, for example, CAP reform could have taken into account the needs of forestry across the UK while also taking into account other EU policies, such as biodiversity protection and renewable energy. Given your view that the European Commission could do more to ensure the coherency of forestry-related policies, how confident are you that UK positions also ensure that coherency, while taking into account the views of the Devolved Administrations?

Information

The European Commission described improvements to the forest knowledge base as a priority area in the Strategy with clear added value for action at the EU level. This involves

both forestry research and knowledge exchange. The National Trust observed that the dissemination of information about the potential benefits of growing trees is very important.

Knowledge exchange in agriculture is an issue that has been of interest to us for some time, initially as part of our inquiry into the Adaptation of Agriculture and Forestry to Climate Change, and subsequently as part of our inquiry into Innovation in EU Agriculture.

Could you, please, set out for us your approach to the transfer of forestry-related knowledge to practitioners? To what extent is advice on forestry provided by the Farming Advice Service?

Implementation

Once the Council has adopted its Conclusions on the EU Forestry Strategy, the European Commission is planning to adopt a pluriannual plan to support implementation of the Strategy, a plan which you supported in your evidence. A review will be undertaken in 2017/18 to assess progress.

We were struck by the comment by the European Commission that “the effectiveness of cooperation and coordination [between administrations at different levels] has an effect on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy”. This observation raises the issue of how the UK Government can ensure effective implementation of the Strategy across the UK. We would welcome your thoughts on this, including whether a specific ministerial or official level dialogue on forestry across the four UK Administrations might be developed and maintained.

Timber Regulation

Finally, it was clear from the evidence that we took that weaknesses in the implementation of the EU Timber Regulation have been identified. We would welcome clarity from you on how the UK Government are working with the European Commission in advance of its review of the Regulation next year.

We look forward in due course to your response to the above points, including information about the progress that has been made in Council towards the adoption of Conclusions.

I am copying this letter to Mr William Cash MP, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, Sarah Davies, Clerk to the European Scrutiny Committee, Arnold Ridout, Legal Adviser to the European Scrutiny Committee, Les Saunders, Cabinet Office, Liz Halksworth, Scrutiny Coordinator, Defra and Mr Dacian Cioloş, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development.



Lord Boswell
Chairman of the European Union Committee



HOUSE OF LORDS
European Union Committee

House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

Tel: 020 7219 6083
Fax: 020 7219 6715
euclords@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk/lords

Mr Dacian Cioloş
Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

8 May 2014

Dear Mr Cioloş,

COM(2013) 659: Communication from the Commission – A new EU Forests Strategy: for forests and the forest-based sector

We were grateful for the oral evidence that your official, Mr Ignacio Seoane, gave to our Sub-Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries, Environment and Energy on 9 April on the EU Forests Strategy. This was one of four sessions that we held, during which we also heard from UK practitioners, EU representative groups and the UK Government.

We have set out below our reflections based on the comments expressed to us during those sessions.

Principles and vision

Forestry is a challenging policy area for discussion at the EU level. On the one hand, the EU has no formal competence to act. On the other hand, it legislates on a range of issues that impact significantly upon forestry.

We detect an ongoing, and as yet unresolved, attempt to wrestle with this tension. The EU Forestry Strategy is helpful in setting out a short-term approach to supporting the delivery of sustainable forest management across the EU. It does not help, though, to set a longer-term vision for a sector and a habitat which is unique in the timeframe over which it is managed. In our view, the development of a consensus on a longer-term vision for forestry and what is required from EU policies to deliver that vision is essential before design of a reformed Common Agricultural Policy, along with further review of the EU's MFF in 2017.

Ultimately, whatever vision is adopted at the EU level, it must be underpinned by the principle that one size does not fit all as regards forestry and woodland management across the EU.

Governance

The issue of competence affects the governance of forestry and results in a lack of leadership. The European Commission considers any policy incoherence to be the fault of the Member States, and the UK Government consider that the European Commission itself could do more to ensure the coherence of policy. These differences of opinion are indicative of a failure of cooperation.

We were pleased to hear that the European Commission has had a permanent inter-services working group on forestry since 2001. It is nevertheless worrying to hear criticism from stakeholders and from Member States that internal coordination within the European Commission on this issue is not as strong as it should be. We would welcome any observations that you may have on those comments and any suggestions that you may have to improve the effectiveness of the working group.

We agree largely with the approach to governance taken by the European Commission in its strategy, with the suggestion that the role of the Standing Forestry Committee (SFC), involving technical experts from around the EU, be enhanced.

We were interested to note that the SFC has issued a very limited number of publicly-available opinions in recent years. It is clear that, if the role of the Committee is to be enhanced, a step change is required. If it is the case that Member States and the Commission both see the SFC as playing a pivotal role in coordinating policies across the European Commission and across the European Union, the SFC itself must be significantly more active. We would therefore find it helpful if you could set out for us in more detail, ideally with examples, how you see a strengthened role for the SFC working in reality.

The lack of leadership over EU forestry is exacerbated by the separate, but linked, ForestEurope process. While it is clearly welcome to engage countries beyond the EU in the development of sustainable forestry management, there is a clear danger that the EU waits for ForestEurope for direction rather than taking forward its own vision in parallel.

Information

The European Commission described improvements to the forest knowledge base as a priority area in the Strategy with clear added value for action at the EU level. This involves both forestry research and knowledge exchange. The UK's National Trust observed that the dissemination of information about the potential benefits of growing trees is very important.

Knowledge exchange in agriculture is an issue that has been of interest to us for some time, initially as part of our inquiry into the Adaptation of Agriculture and Forestry to Climate Change, and subsequently as part of our inquiry into Innovation in EU Agriculture.

What recommendations would you make to Member States to improve the transfer of forestry-related knowledge to practitioners?

An important area in which the EU already legislates is that of plant health. It is obviously important that mechanisms are in place to identify and to combat pests and diseases and to share such information among forestry managers and Member States as soon as it is available. We note that "combating pests and diseases" is included in the Strategy as an area in which Member States should advance further. We would therefore be interested in any further comment that you may be able to make as to the leadership that the European Commission intends to take to ensure progress in this area.

Implementation

Once the Council has adopted its Conclusions on the EU Forestry Strategy, the European Commission is planning to adopt a pluriannual plan to support implementation of the Strategy, a plan which was supported by the UK Government in their evidence to us. A review will be undertaken in 2017/18 to assess progress.

We were struck by Mr Seoane's comment that "the effectiveness of cooperation and coordination [between administrations at different levels] has an effect on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy". Within the UK, this highlights the relatively complex system of forestry governance that is in place among the four UK Administrations.

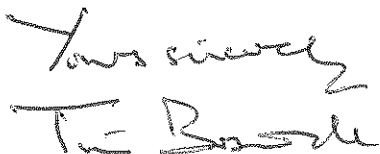
In assessing the implementation of the plan in 2017/18, we recommend that the European Commission assess the extent to which weak cooperation and coordination within Member States may have hindered the implementation of the Strategy by that point.

Timber Regulation

Finally, it was clear from the evidence that we took that weaknesses in the implementation of the EU Timber Regulation have been identified. We welcome the European Commission's review of the Regulation next year.

We look forward in to your response to the above points in due course.

I am copying this letter to Mr William Cash MP, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, Sarah Davies, Clerk to the European Scrutiny Committee, Arnold Ridout, Legal Adviser to the European Scrutiny Committee, and Dan Rogerson MP, UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Water, Forestry, Rural Affairs and Resource Management.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "The Boswell".

Lord Boswell
Chairman of the European Union Committee