

Opening remarks by First Vice-President Timmermans and Vice-President Katainen at the press conference on stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests

First Vice-President Timmermans:

Good afternoon

Jyrki and I are really happy to talk to you today about an important Communication, which we have just adopted on stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests.

Forests host 80% of biodiversity on land, support the livelihoods of around a quarter of the world's population, and are vital to our efforts to fight climate change.

Protecting forests is a significant part of our responsibility to meet the commitments under the Paris Agreement, because greenhouse gas emissions linked to deforestation are the second biggest cause of climate change.

The figures are quite shocking. Between 1990 and 2016 the world has been losing forest cover at a rate equivalent to about 800 football pitches an hour.

And while the EU is not home to the major primary forests of the world, our consumption habits have a significant impact on them. The EU represents around 10% of final consumption of products associated with deforestation.

The EU has consistently taken action to tackle deforestation and forest degradation. We are not starting from scratch. But it is time to step up our efforts, to improve people's health and livelihoods and ensure a healthy planet for our children and grandchildren.

As this stage in the institutional cycle of course it is not appropriate for us to come out with new legislation, but we will continue until 31 October to do all the necessary work so that the incoming Commission can hit the ground running and so that no time is wasted.

Ursula von der Leyen presented her climate ambitions in the European Parliament last week, and I could well imagine that tackling deforestation would feature in the European Green Deal that she plans to present in her first 100 days in office, as well as in the next Commission's Biodiversity Strategy, 'Farm to Fork' Strategy on sustainable food policies, and in the

Sustainable Europe Investment Plan.

The objectives of today's Communication are two-fold: firstly, and most importantly, we need to protect the existing forest cover, especially the primary forests, which are our most important carbon store and host the greatest biodiversity on the planet.

Secondly, as a complementary measure, and not as an alternative, we need to find ways and means to sustainably regenerate and increase forest cover.

The EU cannot do this alone, we need to be part of a global alliance. That is why our Communication proposes a partnership approach. We need all players on board: producer and consumer countries and international organisations as well as businesses, civil society, the scientific community, and all of us as individual consumers and citizens.

We are setting out today a number of tools that can be put into practice immediately, and we are launching preparatory work for possible regulatory measures, which can be easily picked up and built upon by the incoming Commission.

Our Communication is built around five priorities.

Jyrki will elaborate in a minute on the proposed work with partner countries and international cooperation, what you could call the supply side.

On the more domestic side – or the demand side – we need to focus on reducing the EU's consumption footprint. We must make sure that the products we consume come from deforestation-free supply chains.

We will quickly launch a new Multi-Stakeholder Platform on Deforestation and Forest Degradation to help deliver on this goal.

We will also look into standards and certification schemes that promote 'deforestation-free' products, and develop relevant guidance.

And we will start assessing new regulatory measures to prevent EU consumption linked to deforestation and forest degradation.

Another pillar of our proposal is financial. We have to redirect public and private finance to more sustainable land use and to protection and regeneration of forests.

Lastly, we need to keep up research and innovation, to provide more and better quality information on forest products and supply chains.

This includes establishing an EU Observatory on Deforestation and Forest Degradation to monitor changes in the world's forest cover. This resource will give public bodies, consumers and businesses better access to relevant information, so that they can make better informed decisions.

The Commission will also explore the possibility of strengthening the use of the Copernicus satellite system for forest monitoring.

As you can see, there is a lot of work to come in the next five years – and I have only told you the half of it. So let me hand over now to Jyrki, to tell you what else we have set out in our Communication today.

Vice-President Katainen:

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen also on my behalf.

Frans already provided the big overview on why we are here today announcing this communication, so let me pick up from that.

The issue of disappearance of global forest cover is a very complex issue as forests are linked to a great variety of issues such as people's livelihood, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, water quality and so on.

Lately, deforestation has not been the issue in Europe where we have by activity and awareness actually reversed the trend and been able to increase our forest cover. But globally deforestation remains a serious issue, especially in the tropics.

Although this is not an issue in Europe, we are not detached from the problem. As Frans mentioned, we are linked to it for example via our consumption and trade.

It is good to remember that this is not the first time the Commission has taken action on deforestation. For example, we have worked via our so-called FLEGT programme, development policy, trade agenda and our previous deforestation strategy from 2008.

Although much has been done, it is evident that the problem is far from being solved. That is why we are here today to step up our action on two main fronts; to halt deforestation and increase the world's forest cover.

Protecting the world's forests and increasing the forest cover are complementing actions. By preserving natural forests and planting new ones we are saving biodiversity and decreasing the pressure on our resources.

Sounds simple, but unfortunately there is no quick and simple fix to this highly cross cutting issue – otherwise it would have already been solved.

Due to the complexity we here in the Commission have worked together with several colleagues in order to guarantee a much needed horizontal approach from trade to development cooperation and data.

But it is not enough that we here in the Commission take action.

In Finland one of our many forest-related phrases says – roughly translated – that “the forest will echo what you shout to it”.

So, as we are reinforcing our action, I would like to highlight the importance of good cooperation with the respective third countries.

Several of the deforestation-related issues have links to complex socio-economic issues like poverty, population growth and gaps in governance. Only with credible long-term action, can we create a sustainable change to halt deforestation and increase the global forest cover.

This is why in our Communication we are underlining the partnership approach and taking broad action to bring our partnership countries on board.

For example, we are to pay attention that our Development Cooperation does not cause deforestation and we will share our best practices with other countries when relevant.

We will also engage with the international forums to come up with common solutions.

And also we will see that our trade policy supports our messages.

As Frans mentioned, the next Commission will most likely continue to work on these topics. This Communication is a clear signal from our side that we are taking our responsibility seriously and taking action.

Thank you.