

Reconciling forestry and agriculture: we need a new certification scheme to protect forests



In this interview, [Roby Biwer \(LU/PES\)](#), Member of Bettembourg Municipal Council, answers six questions on the EU action to protect and restore forests worldwide. In the context of the COVID-19, the rapporteur of the CoR opinion on [‘Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world’s forests’](#) calls for a new EU certification scheme and information system that endorses deforestation-free products and short, transparent supply chains. The opinion is to be adopted at the [1-2 July plenary session](#).[□]

Extensive deforestation in the Amazon is driven by global demand for meat, with thousands of hectares being felled every year to feed world meat markets. Are we literally eating up the Amazon rainforest? In general terms, how can we make sure that food production (meat, coffee, cocoa and palm oil) does not have a negative impact on forests? What is the EU role in protecting and restoring the world’s forests? Is the EU doing enough?

Although most consumers are not aware of it, meat, coffee, cocoa and palm oil are amongst the products that are currently causing heavy deforestation at the global level. We must work in two fronts if we want to make markets move towards more sustainable and deforestation-free products. As a first step, we need to reinforce information and educational actions to ensure that consumers are aware of the economic, social and environmental impact of their food-consumption habits. Consumer behaviour can definitely shape food markets and accelerate the production of sustainable and deforestation-free products. For that same purpose, we must also promote healthier and ethically correct diets, stressing both the nutritive and socio-economic benefits of plant-based intakes with high levels of fruits and vegetables that are certified as resulting from deforestation-free supply chains. The second front we need to work on is a European commitment to design and implement a new certification scheme that encourages deforestation-free products and contributes to the promotion worldwide of a forward-looking European vision on forestry and food production.

While significant deforestation mostly happens in non-EU countries, forests are being currently logged in many mountain areas in Europe, for instance in Romania and Slovakia and in some Balkan countries. Why is it happening here? What can be done at the local and regional level to prevent deforestation from happening? Do you have any concrete examples? What would your message be to mayors, presidents of regions and local and regional representatives across the European Union?

I cannot comment on the specific situation in individual countries, but based on my own experience, I can say that it is always key to have a constructive dialogue between all concerned stakeholders and their interests, and we, as

local and regional authorities, are best placed to conduct this dialogue. We need to protect forests and biodiversity, and we need to work with farmers and forest-owners to find appropriate solutions, which will also benefit them in the long run – including those who want to develop the recreational use of forests in a sustainable way. In this context, it has to be clear that international agreements and EU and national laws on forests protection need to be respected and enforced, but local and regional authorities have an important role in mediating conflicts between different interests at the local and regional levels.

Today, it is very difficult to trace where our food comes from, especially with products such as cocoa and rubber, as there are many small producers involved and the supply chain is long and untransparent. What can be done to make supply chains more transparent? How can we ensure that businesses operate in a sustainable manner and that only sustainably sourced goods from deforestation-free supply chains are produced in the EU? Are voluntary and existing codes of conduct sufficient?

Supply chains are difficult to trace, and, in order to make them more transparent and easy to monitor, an information system (starting from the experience of the Ecolabel database) should be implemented, with the help and close involvement of all the stakeholders who can share their expectations, experiences and concerns in order to implement useful and feasible procedures. The information system should include and promote deforestation-free products and implement procedures to check the accuracy of the information and assessments collected in order to improve confidence in the information provided, including strong traceability requirements guaranteeing the origin of products, and stronger monitoring and enforcement systems in order to help prevent fraud and the mislabelling of products.

How would you convince me that I should buy a 'sustainable' bar of chocolate rather than the cheapest type? What is the role of consumers in making our supply chains more sustainable and preventing deforestation in particular?

Given the increasing demand for organic food, which is driven by a higher consumer appetite for bio- and environmentally friendly food products, deforestation-free and sustainable products are increasing their market share. Indeed, the purchase of sustainable products that are environmentally friendly has become a trend, a fancy and sexy statement to make. Thus, a person is willing to pay more for an environmentally friendly product because she or he is making a statement that has a social value and recognition. Citizens' role is definitely crucial in influencing markets.

The Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies were published by the European Commission on 20 May. Both are central to the European Green Deal. What are your first reactions? Is there a reason for hope? How important is reforestation to achieving climate-neutrality in the EU?

The Green Deal lists among its many objectives the design of a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system, preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity, and the 'zero pollution' objective for an environment free of toxic substances. To protect European citizens and ecosystems, the EU must

be more effective in monitoring, reporting, preventing and remedying air, water, and soil and the pollution of consumer products. We can therefore deduce that reforestation to achieve climate neutrality in the EU is of fundamental importance. Europe is moving towards a new way of life, sending a key message to the whole world and aiming at becoming the leader of a new economy decoupled from resource use.

The Covid-19 crisis has hit our global supply chains hard. What are the lessons we can learn from this crisis?

This crisis was caused by globalisation, which spread the virus at a high speed. Today, we know better the extent to which supply chains, such as those linked to industrial farms, are closely intertwined and how the system can easily collapse if a link is broken. Rethinking these mutual dependencies and making supply chains more resilient to global challenges is becoming a must. We must equally reconsider the important role of short (and probably more easily traceable) supply chains, and the need to monitor the relationships with and between long-chain suppliers. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, we have also learned that social disparity leads to less attention being paid to the environment. This occurs because human survival is put in the foreground, while taking care of the environment is only a background consideration for low-income social groups.

Notes:

The European Union has close to 182 million hectares of forests, covering 43% of its land area, making it one of the most forest-rich regions in the world. In addition to providing lumber and wood products, our forests are home to a major part of Europe's biodiversity and contribute to our health and well-being. As a major carbon sink, forests act as an important stopgap to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change ([European Commission](#)).

Since 1990, it is estimated that 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land uses, although the rate of deforestation has decreased over the past three decades. Between 2015 and 2020, the rate of deforestation was estimated at 10 million hectares per year, down from 16 million hectares per year in the 1990s. Agricultural expansion continues to be the main driver of deforestation and forest degradation and the associated loss of forest biodiversity. These and other insights can be found in the report [‘The State of the World’s Forests 2020’](#).

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