

## Forestry's climate impact 'invisible' under UN rules, experts say

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A study by the Confederation of Paper Industries (CEPI) showed forests and forest-based products remove a net of 806 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalents annually – or the equivalent 20% of all fossil emissions in the EU. [Alexander Cahlenstein]

Forests are the planet's biggest carbon "sink" – absorbing more CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere than they emit – but their contribution to cooling the earth's climate is currently not fully accounted for under UN rules, experts say.

The European Commission rang the alarm bell about the state of EU forests last month, saying their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide – the main greenhouse gas responsible for global warming – has been decreasing since 2013 and needs to be restored.

"The sink has to go back to its previous levels" if Europe wants to bring emissions down to net-zero, EU climate chief Frans Timmermans said as he presented the Commission's 2030 climate plan last month.

The Commission said in its 2030 climate proposals that "need a growing sink in order for the EU to achieve climate neutrality by 2050", calling for improved forest management as well as "re- and afforestation" initiatives to restore degraded land and preserve biodiversity.

Forest-based industries, for their part, have insisted on the need to take a comprehensive view of forestry activities in order to evaluate their real contribution to the fight against global warming.

Wood-based products such as paper or furniture store CO<sub>2</sub> until it is eventually returned to the atmosphere when they are burned at the end of their life-cycle, forming a closed carbon loop, said Peter Holmgren, a forestry expert who spoke at a Brussels event organised last month with the Swedish forest industries.

But this does not take into account the avoided emissions when wood fibres are used to replace plastics or other fossil-based materials, said Holmgren, who is former director-general at the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), a non-profit research group.

“Some of that oil or coal stays in the ground,” he said, underlining the “substitution effect” of biomass in relation to fossil fuels. “And this is an immediate effect that we need to take into account,” he told the Brussels event.

‘Substitution effect’ of forestry sector

The Confederation of European Paper Industries (CEPI), which also supported the event, produced a study earlier this year to try and quantify the “substitution effect” of wood-based products.

“The results show that forests and forest-based products remove a net of 806 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalents annually” – or the equivalent 20% of all fossil emissions in the EU, said Holmgren, who is the main author of the study.

But according to Holmgren, current rules at UN level do not take this into account.

While the “net sink” effect of forests is part of the annual reporting obligations of EU member states under the EU regulation on land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF), this is currently not the case at the UN level, Holmgren pointed out.

“When the IPCC produces their global report, they do not include that net sink,” Holmgren explained, saying “this is by and large invisible in current climate reporting” to the United Nations. “In the land report, for example, it is explicitly excluded, which means there is a dissonance” between the EU and UN reporting rules, he told participants at the event.

“So we don’t have a good picture,” he added.

Artur Runge-Metzger, a senior official at the European Commission’s climate directorate, said the CEPI study was “100% in line” with the Commission’s own climate policy proposals, which aim for a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

“We recognise the value of forests and agriculture” when it comes to climate change, Runge-Metzger told participants at the event, saying the so-called “invisible effect” of forestry “is fully captured” in the EU’s carbon inventories.

“And I think there is a possibility to accelerate, otherwise, we wouldn’t have put forward the 55% target,” he told the audience, saying the Commission “supports the bio-economy” as a way to substitute fossil-based materials.

Commission under fire for including 'carbon sinks' into EU climate goals

The European Commission on Thursday (17 September) defended its plan to bring carbon removals from agriculture, land use and forestry into the EU’s updated climate target for 2030, saying this was in line with UNFCCC standards.

‘Carbon farming’

However, forestry is not the only sector contributing to the “substitution effect,” Runge-Metzger added, saying solar and wind energy also displace fossil fuels in their own way and could claim the same kind of recognition under the EU’s carbon accounting rules.

“We have the same discussion with the steel industry,” which claim to be displacing coal because wind turbines are made of steel, he said. “And you can do that across the entire economy,” Runge-Metzger remarked.

What is currently not reflected in EU policy, however, is the “carbon sink” function of forests and agriculture, Runge-Metzger pointed out, saying the Commission is currently looking into ways of rewarding farmers and forest owners for maintaining carbon sinks.

“At the end of the day, it’s the farmer or the forester who will have to make a living,” Runge-Metzger reminded. “If we don’t value the sinks function of the forests and agriculture, farmers and foresters will not care. And that’s what we fear is happening,” he warned.

“Let’s be honest, the substitution effect works because we have a carbon price in Europe for the energy sector, which pushes out coal from the energy mix,” Runge-Metzger remarked. “And the same is true for any other place where there is a carbon price – there is immediately a better fit for forestry and agriculture products” that can act as substitutes for fossil fuels, he said.

“So the question really is: how can we make sure that we count what’s happening on the sink side” and “put a value” on carbon sinks, he continued. “And that is something we are exploring with the farmers” as part of a new EU “carbon farming initiative” which aims to reward farming practices that remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere.

The EU scheme will include new regulations to certify carbon removals based on a “robust and transparent” carbon accounting methodology to monitor and verify the authenticity of carbon removals, the Commission said in its ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy presented in May.

“That will take us many years and it might not happen between now and 2025 or 2030,” Runge-Metzger said. “But in 2050, we need to be in a better place.”

Jytte Guteland, a Swedish MEP who was the lead author of the European Parliament’s position on the EU’s 2030 climate proposal, said the Commission had “underestimated the potential” of forests to act as carbon sinks.

“I think there is a bigger potential,” she told participants at the event, saying well-managed forests “will actually improve the carbon sink for Europe, not the opposite”.

She also called out what she described as a frequent misconception among lawmakers in the European Parliament that forests should be ring-fenced in order to preserve their ability to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>.

“From the point of view of my own country, Sweden, we have a common understanding that when the tree is growing, it can have a bigger carbon uptake. So we need to have more sustainable management of forests” to make sure new trees are planted in replacement of those that are harvested for the needs of the paper and wood-based industries, Guteland said.

Runge-Metzger agreed with Guteland that foresters need incentives for “active forest management” practices that preserve carbon sinks. However, he insisted that those incentives “won’t come like manna from heaven,” and that those “expenses” need to be covered somehow.

“So the question is: are we going to rely on subsidies to do this, or are we going to find other ways to do that? That is where we would like to see a debate among foresters, the forest industry, and farmers on how we can realise that potential”.

Source: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/forestrys-climate-impact-invisible-under-un-rules-experts-say/>