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The European Forest – based Sector Research Forum 2005

Forest-based Sector Research under the Austrian Presidency

Excellencies, distinguished congress participants, ladies and gentlemen! It is a great honour for me to speak to you on behalf of the Austrian Federal Minister Josef Pröll.

On the 1st of January 2006, Austria will assume the Council presidency for the second time since joining the European Union. As a wood and forest country situated in the heart of Europe, Austria will put special emphasis on advocating the issues of forest-based sector policy in the proven way.

Forest and wood-related research has a very long tradition especially in Austria. It ranges from the globally recognised forest inventories to highly modern achievements in forest genetics; from the development of innovative marketable manufacturing and processing technologies for wood to the use of wood for the generation of energy. Austria has realised the advantages of transnational and international research networks at an early stage. It is particularly on the European level that it plays a leading role in many projects, for example, in the framework of INTERREG.

In Austria, forest-based sector policy is understood in a very broad sense. The protection against natural hazards, for instance, is largely taken care of by the Austrian Forest Technical Service for Torrent, Avalanche and Erosion Control in a proven manner. The good European relations that have been established in this field will bring significant synergetic effects in the future. Let me just give you one example: Within the scheme of “European research area – networking” Austria has positioned itself very well, particularly in the area of “flood risk management”. Here, good coordination and harmonisation of all related research activities is to be expected with regard to potential donors.

I would now like to come back to the core issues of the forest-based sector. For this purpose, I shall give you a short outline of the focus areas of EU forest policy from the Austrian point of view:

The EU Constitution does not define a **common forest policy**. Thus, forest policy is subject to the principle of subsidiarity, which means that the responsibility lies within each member state. Nevertheless, many European Union policy fields touch forest policy, as has been shown in a study initiated by the Forest Department of the “Ministry of Life” (Helga Pülzl, Evaluation of European Community Regulations and Policies relevant to Forest Policy, Vienna, 2003 and 2005). After all, “forest policy”, according to a most appropriate formulation recently made, is not about trees, but about people who live from the forest and in close relationship with it.

Forests have gained new importance in the EU since the joining of the wood industry countries Sweden, Finland and Austria 10 years ago. The fact that the “Forestry Strategy for the European Union” could be approved in 1998 under the Austrian presidency bears evidence of this development. Even though that was only a declaration of political will, it was at least a first step towards coordinating and harmonising activities of relevance to forests.

On the basis of the evaluation report on the EU Forest Strategy presented by the Commission a couple of months ago, the Agriculture Council has now decided that an **EU Forest Action Plan** should be elaborated until June 2006. Although this will be the task of the Commission, Austria will before and during its presidency deal with this topic intensively. The main objective is to define concrete activities on the basis of the EU Forest Strategy in order to strengthen the position of the forest-based sector among competing policy fields on the EU level, to improve the coordination of forest issues in the Commission, between the member states and the Commission, and between the EU members themselves, and to ensure that the sector has a say in other political areas as well. In addition, the different EU Programmes (for example, Rural Development, Framework Programme for Research, and others) shall be addressed purposefully. Austria will also do its best to see that the action plan becomes as concrete and practicable as possible. This is the only way to reach the set goals. The EU Forest Strategy may need to be updated or completed in some points, but an overall revision should be avoided if possible. This would just unnecessarily delay or even hamper the work on the action programme.

Forest Programmes and a European Charter for Wood?

In the context of the strategies for sustainable development, Austria has also started a broad Forest Dialogue. The resulting Forest Programme 2005 and a Work Programme will be ready for decision-making shortly. This Dialogue has also clearly identified the areas where relevant research policy is needed. Let me outline these focus areas briefly: climate protection, health and vitality of forests, productivity and

economic aspects, biological diversity, protective functions, social, overall economic and international aspects.

The main result of the Forest Dialogue, however, has again proved to be the recognition of the key role that forests and the use of its renewable products play in the field of sustainable development. Yet the available wood potential is by far not used to the extent that would be possible. A Charter for Wood – possibly also on the European level – shall help to generally further this ingenious raw material called wood and promote it in the best way in its manifold fields of application.

Illegal Logging and Trading with Wood

Illegal logging and trading with the wood thus obtained has been a serious ecological, economic and social problem for years world-wide, although not so much in Europe. The EU has been addressing this problem more intensively for over one year. In a so-called FLEGT Action Plan (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) concrete measures shall be taken. The current British presidency has already established the necessary legal basis. In view of the fact that bilateral agreements with the countries concerned are among the key issues of this action programme, the following presidencies will have to place special emphasis on such agreements. From the Austrian point of view, it will be important to make sure that practicable and reasonable solutions with regard to costs become effective without putting wood in general, or countries where illegal logging is not an issue, at a disadvantage.

Forest and Environment

Environmental policy has meanwhile developed into the policy field that has the strongest effects on national forest policies. NATURA 2000, the Biodiversity Strategy, the Water Framework Directive, the Strategy for Soil Protection, Forest Focus (forest monitoring), to name a few, are all - whether they include forestry or not - environmental activities the results of which mainly influence the economic scope of action. With regard to using our forest increments more intensively and ensuring supplies to the wood industry, it will be a major political challenge to make these environmental activities practicable and management friendly. The sector must exert great pressure to make sure that all three pillars of sustainable forest management are treated equally and have the same rights.

Development of Rural Areas

Forestry is an integral part of rural development. In this context, the new programme for 2007 – 2013 represents a big challenge for forest policy. Thanks to the efforts made by the Austrian Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Pröll, it has been possible to bring the associations of forest owners back under the regulation (EAFRD). Special attention is particularly required here in order to strengthen the use of forest resources. An intensity of use in the 25 EU members of slightly more than 50% will

certainly not be a good signal for Europe as a location for wood industry. Apart from other things, major improvements are required in this area.

UN Forum on Forests

Especially in view of “illegal logging” and the related issues of ecological and social dumping, the loss of forest areas and biotopes, and the equal treatment of all pillars of sustainable forest management world-wide, among other issues, a legally binding system (UN Forest Convention, for example) has become more important than ever. The EU has repeatedly advocated such a system although it has become increasingly difficult to ensure a common position on this topic. Some member countries seem to have lost their faith in a rigid and legally binding forest regime, particularly after the failure of UNFF 5 in May 2005, which was mainly due to the resistance from the United States, Brazil and many developing countries. The follow-up session will take place in February 2006 – this will be a special challenge for the Austrian presidency. It will be most difficult to guarantee a clear EU position, but the progress of the discussion of forest issues on UN level will to a great extent depend on this position. If the EU gives up its comparatively progressive stance and, consequently, its role as a driving force, forests will widely disappear from the political agenda as a global theme. Alternatives such as covering forests in an additional protocol to the CBD (Convention of Biological Diversity) are seen with scepticism in Austria. It would imply that (just like in the EU) the ecological pillar of sustainable forest management would be well covered whereas the social and especially the economic pillar would hardly be considered. Of course, it is also a task of the EU presidency to intensively contribute towards convincing those countries that show a disapproving attitude.

Outlook

It is for the first time in EU history that forestry and wood industry have gained such importance, that the relationship between the two branches is so close, and that so many member countries are willing to set aside the principle of subsidiarity in favour of an improvement of the situation on EU level. It is imperative to take advantage of this situation and make courageous steps forward. Even if a common forest policy cannot be reached, at least a strong policy field should be established to ensure coordinated action and the support and strengthening of sustainable forest management in a comprehensive sense.

Before I come to the end of my speak, I would like to draw your attention to important events that will take place during the Austrian presidency.

On the 2nd and 3rd of May 2006, the launching event of the FTP's strategic research agenda will take place in Admont, Styria, an area of outstanding beauty. There could be no better location in the heart of Europe, well suited also for presenting the origins of the forest-based sector. Planning of this event is well advanced, and our thanks go

especially to the secretariat of the programme committee and organisation committee. The programme of this event will be finalised in due time, but, please, put down the date in your calendars now, so that you will not miss it!

On the 4th and 5th of May 2006, high-ranking representatives from all technology platforms and from administration will meet in a conference in Vienna that is organised in close cooperation with the European Commission DG Research. The EU Research Commissioner, Mr. Janez Potocnik, is expected to come to this event.

From the 28th to the 30th of June 2006, a meeting of European general directors of forests is planned to take place in Upper Austria. This shall also provide an opportunity to further develop these important research policy strategies for the forest-based sector.

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, I hope that I have been able to give you a short outline of the focus areas that shall be dealt with during the Austrian presidency. May I ask you to support these plans in the best possible way. I am also certain that many more good actions for the forest-based sector will be taken by our Finnish colleagues, who will be our direct successors in the Council presidency.

Thank you very much for your attention!