



Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia

on Forests, Sustainable Forest Management and Adaptation to Climate Change

Ministers of Agriculture of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland¹ and Slovakia), Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia WITH REGARD to the vital role of forests and their environmental, social and economic functions, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the present challenges to the forest sector as well as specific needs and conditions of European forests affected by aggravated impacts of climate change, agree on the following:

1. RECOGNISE that climate change, related droughts, natural disasters, spread of pests, diseases (such as the bark beetle calamity) and forest fires have severe detrimental impacts on European forests and UNDERLINE the need for climate-smart approaches incorporated into sustainable forest management, efficient legislative and financial instruments, both at national and EU levels, as well as for enhanced international and transboundary cooperation in order to find effective solutions for these challenges related to forests.
2. WELCOME the adoption of the European Commission's Report on the progress in the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and EMPHASISE the need for new EU forest strategy to better adapt strategic dimension of the EU action to challenges of forests and climate change, while further encouraging the sustainable management of forest and their multifunctional role, and STRESS the need for creating conditions for supporting forest owners and forest managers in their efforts to adapt forests to climate change.
3. STRESS that forests and sustainable forest management significantly contribute to the 2030 Agenda and all its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as to the Paris Agreement and therefore WELCOME the adoption of the European Commission Communication (2019) on Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests. In this regard, UNDERLINE the importance of EU action in the global context, not only setting a good example but also encouraging appropriate actions from partner countries.
4. RECOGNISE the importance of forests and wood for carbon sequestration and storage, substitution of greenhouse-gas-intensive materials and fossil fuels, as well as wide range of other vital ecosystem services provided by forests to all

¹ In the case of Poland the Joint Declaration is signed by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on behalf of the Minister of Environment responsible for forestry

citizens, however ACKNOWLEDGE that forests themselves are suffering from climate change as well.

5. STRESS that, with regard to the LULUCF sector and LULUCF Regulation, setting a binding commitments for each EU Member State and establishing “no debit” rule for emissions, the capacity of forests to sequester carbon can be lowered due to the unprecedented adverse effects of climate change and related incidental felling, there is a possibility that emissions from the forest sector of the affected countries can be temporarily higher than CO₂ removals and therefore it should be acknowledged that the forest sector is characterized by a high degree of unpredictability in this regard and its role should not be overestimated in comparison with other sectors.
6. HIGHLIGHT that in the near future, the focus should be also put on enhancing the resilience of European forests under climate change, the regeneration and the restoration of affected forests, on research and innovation and the adaptation of forests and the forest sector to climate change.
7. ENCOURAGE scaled-up contribution of the forest sector to the implementation of the updated EU Bioeconomy Strategy and of the Circular Economy Action Plan and ACKNOWLEDGE the initiatives driven by the EU Member States, such as the BIOEAST ensuring cooperation among the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.
8. EMPHASISE the importance of possible resuming negotiations on a Legally Binding Agreement on Forests in Europe under the auspices of the UN (UNECE with support of FAO), ACKNOWLEDGE the work of the Forest Europe accomplished in this matter.

We therefore CALL FOR:

9. the development of new innovative approaches in order to adapt forests and forest sector to climate change as well as to ensure effective and immediate reaction to various impacts of climate change, such as natural disasters;
10. the strengthening of international and transboundary cooperation with the aim to further enhance the exchange of information regarding the transboundary spread of pests and diseases, to compare different approaches and share the best practices, thus better contributing to the existing pan-European cooperation approaches (Forest Europe, European Forest Institute);
11. the establishment of innovative financial measures from the EU with the aim to ensure the regeneration and adaptation of affected forests to climate change;
12. the reduction of administrative burden in the EU forestry measures under Rural development and in state aid generally (for example by allowing block exemptions);

13. ensuring more prominent role of the forest sector within the Common Agricultural Policy especially through the Rural Development Programme and other EU incentives and subsidies in the forest sector in order to achieve the objectives of the EU Forest Strategy;
14. reflecting the current damages to forests in the preparation of National Forest Accounting Plans as requested by the LULUCF Regulation and especially in the process of finalization of the Forest Reference Levels, taking into account lowered capacity of forests sector to contribute to the sinks of CO₂ in the upcoming years;
15. the modernization of the forest sector, the related infrastructure and development and promotion of forest-based system and value-chain approaches which are needed to fulfil the aims of the EU Bioeconomy Strategy and of the Circular Economy Action Plan, and better incorporation of the needs of forest sector into the next research and innovation framework programme Horizon Europe;
16. providing support for macro regional networks, such as the BIOEAST Forestry Working Group focusing on research and innovation linked to the implementation of forest-related national policies, EU forest strategy and related policies in a sustainable and circular bioeconomy;
17. the continuation and further enhancement, as appropriate, of the cooperation in order to facilitate the process leading to the final adoption of the Legally Binding Agreement on Forests in Europe;
18. strengthening the cooperation in order to enhance further contribution to the activities of the Forest Europe process and the European Forest Institute, especially in the field of the improvement of resilience and adaptation of European forests to climate change, bearing in mind the context of the forthcoming Eighth Forest Europe Ministerial Conference in Bratislava in 2020;
19. the support of environmentally friendly production system such as agroforestry through the common agricultural policy to meet environmental challenges, mitigate climate change and to adapt to its impacts;
20. the promotion of efforts aimed at the conclusion of partnership agreements between the EU and partner countries that minimize the risk of deforestation and forest degradation associated with commodity imports in the EU.

We CALL ON the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament to support Member States in the implementation of actions outlined in this declaration, especially with regard to:

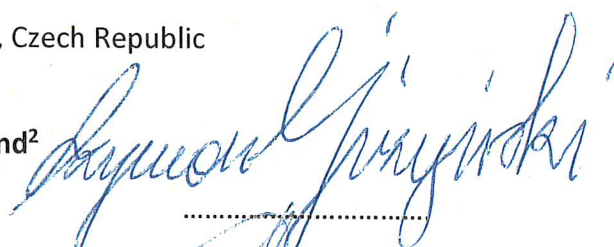
- reflecting the current state of forests affected by recent damages when finalizing Forest Reference Levels according to the LULUCF Regulation, and ensuring that such reflection, including of increased likelihood of future damages, will be enabled in the establishment of future Forest Reference Levels,
- ensuring adequate financial measures which reflect the need for adaptation to impacts of climate change including the reduction of related administrative burden for state aid, and
- the activities of the BIOEAST.

On 4th October 2019 in Prague, Czech Republic

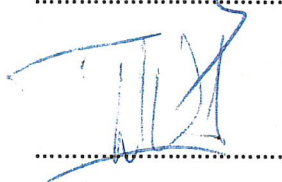
Bulgaria




Poland²



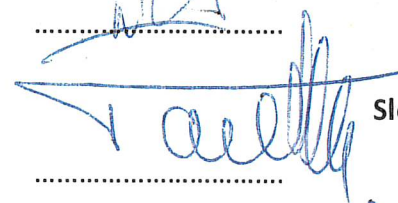
Croatia



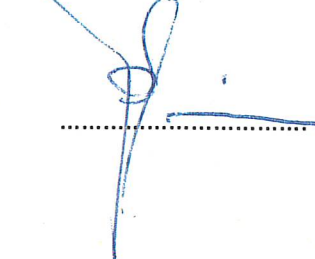
Slovakia



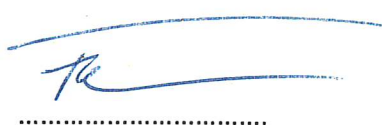
Czech Republic



Slovenia



Hungary



² In case of Poland on behalf of the Minister of Environment