

## **Estonian Government must take action to show that biodiversity and climate are forest management priorities**

**The Estonian Ministry of Environment has rejected an impact assessment by the Stockholm Environment Institute Tallinn of the Estonian Forestry Development Plan until 2030 on the grounds that it focuses too heavily on climate and biodiversity. Estonian, European and international civil society denounces the Ministry's decision, calls for the impact assessment to be taken back into consideration, and calls on the Estonian government to ensure that its aims for forest management to 2030 and beyond centre climate and biodiversity as priorities.**

On January 24th 2020, an [impact assessment](#) for the Estonian Forestry Development Plan (EFDP) to 2030 conducted by Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Tallinn was revealed by the Estonian Ministry of Environment. The Ministry [stated that it rejects the work](#) and will not be using it as an input for the EFDP 2030, explaining that the impact assessment was framed too heavily around climate action and biodiversity protection, rather than around the aims of the Development Plan.

On the contrary, however, the Development Plan's initiation document states that Estonia must ensure that forest use *"helps to mitigate climate changes and adapt to them and ensures a socially balanced life and economic environment and a good conservation status of the forest ecosystems."* In addition, the '[Approval of Estonian Forest Policy](#)' document defines sustainable forestry as *"maintenance and use of forests and forest lands in a way and pace which ensures their biological diversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and potential"*. The Forest Act and the Estonian Constitution also require decisions to consider sustainable use of natural environment as a priority. On the grounds of the aims outlined in the Development Plan and in other policy, therefore, **the SEI Tallinn impact assessment is firmly in line with the framings required, and the government's rejection is unjustified.**

**The rejection is rendered all the more damaging and sadly unsurprising in the context of Estonia's strong forestry industry lobby and political landscape.** The assessment states that logging over the volume of 8 million cubic metres (Mm<sup>3</sup>) of forest per year is undesirable due to negative impacts on species which should be protected by the EU Habitats Directive. Since the official logging volumes of 2017 and 2018 were 12,5 Mm<sup>3</sup> per year, following the recommendations would require a decrease in logging. However, industry groups have [publicly expressed their intent](#) to raise logging volumes to 15 Mm<sup>3</sup>, and Estonia's political landscape is [fuelling the fire](#). Estonia has the second-highest carbon emissions per capita in the EU, yet the government continues to support [unsustainable forest management](#), and has stated that [the consumption of biomass for energy will rise](#), raising questions about where that wood will come from, while the EFDP is still being developed.

**Intensive forest management is bad for the climate and for biodiversity.** [The Commission has acknowledged](#) that intensive harvesting is leading to a receding EU forest carbon sink, and that [European biodiversity is declining](#). Estonia has [one of Europe's most intensive forestry industries](#), including being home to Europe's [biggest producer of wood pellets for bioenergy](#). Meanwhile studies show that forest bird indexes are in steady decline, 16 forest fungi are extinct or in critical condition, and Estonian forests are projected to become a net carbon source if current practices continue. Young trees and plantations absorb and store far less carbon than older, biodiverse forests, and the lag-time between the impact of logging and burning trees for bioenergy or converting them to short-lived products and the same amount of CO<sub>2</sub> being reabsorbed by new growth can be from decades to centuries. Yet if organic material is [left to decompose](#) and older trees are protected, the ecosystem retains precious nutrients and habitats, and the carbon sink receives twice the benefit compared to making biomass into short-lived products.

**77% of Estonians support a reduction in logging volume**, as shown by [a study](#) conducted by Tallinn University and Turu-uuringute AS in August 2018, and during the scoping phase of the Development Plan, high logging volumes emerged as a number-one concern. The public debate is ongoing. Between April 2016 and April 2018, 260 articles on forest issues were published by 7 news outlets, and other media sources were not reviewed, so the total coverage is even higher. There have also been repeated efforts by civil society to save local or high nature value forest plots, something which it should not be necessary for citizens to undertake. **It is worth noting that opponents of the current policy agree that the reduction of logging volumes should come at the expense of bioenergy, which research proves is highly emissive and [not carbon neutral](#).**

Finally, **the process is marred by a lack of transparency which must be rectified.** The Ministry rejected the assessment without consulting the Development Plan's Steering Committee, and in December was opposed to letting the Committee view the impact assessment, even though the Committee was summoned by the Ministry itself to "[lead the drafting of the development plan](#)". The first draft of the impact assessment is still not public.

**It is clear that Estonians care about their forests and biodiversity, but neither the government nor the industry are acknowledging the impacts of intensive logging or taking measures to protect precious ecosystems and carbon sinks. Policy processes are shaped by industry interests, and lack the transparency required for real progress.**

In the context of a warming world, of a pan-European climate emergency as declared by the European Parliament, and of indisputable scientific evidence which shows that [primary and old-growth forests](#) are among our most efficient [carbon sinks](#), **all governments should be putting the protection and restoration of natural forests front and centre.** The actions of the Estonian Ministry for Environment, in rejecting SEI Tallinn's impact assessment, and of the government, in supporting intensive forest management practices, go against the kind of action that is needed in Estonia and internationally.

**We call on the Ministry to take the assessment back into account, and to ensure that any aims for forest management to 2030 and beyond centre climate and biodiversity as priorities.** By doing so, Estonia can show that it is committed to meeting EU climate and energy efficiency targets, as well as those under the Paris Agreement. The government must show how it will manage its forests for climate resilience, for an increased carbon sink, for ecosystem health, and for production based on sustainable biomass availability, rather than continuing with current or increased harvesting levels for short-term economic gain at the expense of forests and the climate.

Signed,  
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