

Thematic Group on Supporting the Needs of Forest-Dominant Rural Areas and Municipalities: Laying the Groundwork for networking under the Forest Strategy

This was the **first meeting** of the **Thematic Group (TG)** on **Supporting the Needs of Forest-Dominant Rural Areas and Municipalities: Laying the groundwork for networking under the Forest Strategy**, whose aim is to bring together representatives of and stakeholders from forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities across the EU to explore how to better support those areas and communities. The objectives of the meeting were to discuss specific needs and issues facing forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities; share experiences between actors to identify challenges and barriers to addressing these specific needs and issues; and explore existing structures for involving forest-dominant areas in policy processes and where there are gaps.

Socio-economic, demographic and environmental needs and issues facing forest-dominant rural areas

The session was framed by a **quick overview** of the needs and issues facing forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities submitted in the Expression of Interest for the TG. Experts from Germany, Spain, and Croatia then provided specific examples.



Anton Burkhart, Confederation of European Forest Owners (CEPF), explained how they had undertaken collaborative forest pasture re-organisation in Bavaria's Oberammergau region in response to challenges, such as changing land management practices, depopulation, climate change impacts and financial pressures. To enhance the ecosystem services (economic, environmental, and social) provided by the forests in this mountainous area, local stakeholders came together to develop a package of voluntary actions to be carried out on farms and in forests.



Marta Corella Gaspar, Orea Town Council and esMontañas: Spanish Association of Mountain Municipalities, presented the ways their sparsely populated region in Spain had sought to improve publicly managed forest resources. She noted a number of environmental and cultural issues concerning forest sustainability which are being addressed

Event Information

Date: 16 March 2023

Location: Virtual meeting

Organisers: The CAP Implementation Contact Point (CAPI CP)

Participants: 40 experts from 16 Member States representing a broad spectrum of forest stakeholders, including various civil society organisations, Managing Authorities, National Networks, and EU level bodies.

Outcomes: Taking stock and explore the socio-economic and environmental needs and issues facing forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities; sharing experiences between actors to identify challenges and barriers to addressing their needs / issues; and exploring existing structures for involving forest-dominant areas in policy processes and what the added benefit of networking and networks to support key stakeholders might be.

Web page: [1st TG meeting on Forest-Dominant Rural Areas and Municipalities](#)

through a national network of forest municipalities, bioeconomy business developments and circular economy projects. Community-led, nature-based action is prominent and aims to leave no one behind.



Ivan Ambros, Competence Centre Ltd. for research and development, shared experience in Croatia with science-led territorial approaches to forest management. The 'Land of the oaks' initiative applies innovation through research and business specialisation to foster smart and sustainable use of the region's forest stocks, including protected species and habitats. Carbon-neutral developments and waste minimisation are prioritised through this technology-driven approach, blending timber productivity with nature conservation and carbon sequestration.

Networking featured strongly in the three examples, with positive synergies promoted from involving multiple different stakeholders (including from across Europe) with various backgrounds and expertise and building digital networks. The plenary discussion following the presentations highlighted additional needs and issues facing Europe's forests, e.g., relating to biodiversity, pests and diseases, forest access, land ownership, energy production,



carbon markets and certification, supply chains and profitability. TG members called for joined up policy frameworks as a key factor that would enable the sustainability of Europe's forest-dominant areas to be optimised and addressed in an integrated way. Additionally, traditional management methods, e.g. grazing livestock in forests, were emphasised as needing support due to their potential to provide ecosystem services and reduce climate-related risks, such as forest fires.

Enhancing the voice of forest-dominant areas through networking



The next session focused on how networking helps to give voice to forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities in addressing their needs and issues.

Marc de Smet, DG AGRI, highlighted the importance of networking recognised in the [EU Forest Strategy 2030](#) and the [Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas](#). He highlighted the tools that are already available, including forest-specific and non-forest-specific support under the CAP. Furthermore, while forest-dominant areas may face forest-specific challenges, avenues for engagement around other challenges generally faced by remote rural areas were highlighted, e.g. the Rural Revitalisation Platform and Rural Observatory, for giving a voice to forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities.



TG members shared examples of existing forest networks in Finland and Germany. **Leena Leskinen**, Finnish Forest Centre, and **Roderich Freiherr von Loë**,

German Forestry Council, outlined how coordinated collaboration among forest owners and other stakeholders could foster understanding of the varying demands on forests and support their continued provision of environmental, economic and social benefits.

TG members then split into working groups to discuss:

1. What are the current governance structures that aim to involve stakeholders from forest-dominant areas?
2. What needs and issues facing forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities are not being addressed through these existing processes?
3. How could networking help address gaps and strengthen existing situations?



The importance of balancing the multifunctional uses of forests emerged as a clear priority, with calls for improved dialogue with and consideration of forest stakeholders' perspectives in policy processes, e.g. how varying targets may be simultaneously achieved, such as biodiversity enhancement and renewable energy production. Networking offers the opportunity for knowledge exchange on how similar needs and issues have been addressed in other forest-dominant areas, as well as the potential for integrated territorial approaches among multiple forest owners and other rural actors. Forest networks already existing at local, regional, national and EU level could enhance their connections and dialogue to address shared issues. Securing the sustainable management of forests into the future is critical as well, so intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills about the value of the multiple functions of forests, including their cultural significance, should be promoted. Expanding the applicability of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System to forest areas could help facilitate these actions.

Wrap up and next steps

Members concluded that the focus for their ongoing work should include climate action, local bioeconomy, and sustainable forest management. The 2nd meeting will be held on 31 May - more information may be found on the [TG webpage](#).