



POLICY FOCUS GROUPS

From Dialogue to Action:

Policy Recommendations
for a Future-Proof
Forestry Sector



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Introduction

The FOREST4EU project recognizes the diverse challenges and opportunities facing European forests and agroforestry. To address regional specificities, three Policy Focus Group (PFGs) have been established, covering Central Europe, South-East Europe, and South-West Europe. These groups bridge the gap between policy and research on innovation in forestry and agroforestry, examining regional patterns of forest management (including multipurpose forestry and ecosystem management) and the uptake of CAP funding. This activity facilitates lesson-learning regarding innovation through EIP-Agri Operational Groups and supportive policies.

The PFGs were salient for feedback on survey results regarding barriers on developing innovations, and identification of similar challenges and opportunities across different countries. The interactive design and multi-stakeholder approach of the PFGs were useful to extract potential solutions and recommendations for EU policy makers. Each of the PFGs met three times throughout 2024. The sessions were scheduled for two to three hours. In total, there were 184 participants at the nine PFG meetings, representing government authorities, forest owners and companies, research, and advisory and support organizations. Their commitment is highly appreciated.



Policy Focus Group for Central Europe

1.1. Main topics addressed

There has been rather limited uptake of EIP-Agri Operational Groups in Central Europe's forest sector. The PFG for Central Europe began on 13.03.2024, introducing into the concept and approach of the EIP-Agri Operational Groups and their role in the EU CAP Network, and showcasing examples of OGs in Slovenia and Germany. Attention was devoted to the amount of private forest lands existing in these two countries, the salience of forest practitioners and the potential of OGs for innovations in the forest-based value chain. Moreover, the European Green Deal and national level policy targets were discussed and analyzed. Apparently national policies for forestry, rural development and environment are more relevant for the OG innovators than the forest-related EGD goals. At the second meeting on 10.07.2024, interactive discussions facilitated the exchange of opinions and ideas on the role of government and markets for innovation in forestry. This session was fundamental to highlight participants' opinion and to collect their contributions and ideas on beneficial framework conditions for innovation. Experts from the forestry field were invited to discuss about forest management, breakout sessions were prepared to encourage the exchange of opinions and different perspectives, and the results of a survey were presented. At the third meeting on 16.10.2024, the main barriers for the uptake of EIP-Agri Operational Groups were stressed out as well as the importance of government intervention in rural development policy.

1.2. Identified challenges and barriers

In forestry innovations, national policy objectives for forestry, rural development, and the environment take precedence over the European Green Deal (EGD) goals. The relevant EGD targets like increased forest cover and climate/biodiversity resilience are generally compatible with active forest management. Forest owners, managers, and research institutions are crucial for driving innovation in this area. There is broad agreement that a good idea alone is not an innovation and that demands and expectations must be met. Survey data was presented, which indicated that a majority of respondents were either unaware of or unclear about government-sponsored innovation programs in their respective countries and simultaneously expressed hesitation regarding the direct profitability of innovations within the forest sector.



1. Policy Focus Group for Central Europe

The European forestry sector is facing a critical impasse: without urgent government action to rectify the severe lack of pre-financing, the instability of long-term planning, and the fragmentation of knowledge sharing, market-driven investment and innovation in climate-adaptive R&D will remain unrealized, threatening the sustainability and resilience of forest ecosystems. OG projects in forestry face hurdles: complex applications, heavy financial planning, and unsupportive government. EIP-Agri uptake is limited by administrative burdens, limited coverage of forestry in rural development policy, and uncertain post-project sustainability, hindering innovation. Moreover, a historical analysis reveals a recent paradigm shift in EU forest policy, marked by a decoupling of forestry issues from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

1.3. Potential solutions identified

To improve European forestry, governments must prioritize financial stability through consistent frameworks, supporting long-term planning, knowledge sharing, and stakeholder networks. Market-driven solutions should focus on targeted investments and R&D for innovative tools, empowering forest managers. Crucially, enhancing the adaptability of forestry institutions is vital. This requires a collaborative effort, ensuring resources and strategies align to foster a resilient and innovative sector.

1.4. Reflection from the convenor

The FOREST4EU Policy Focus Group aimed to refine EIP-Agri funding for forestry innovation in Central Europe. Participants agreed innovation requires more than just ideas, emphasizing the need for practical, business-oriented support, and streamlined processes. Discussions highlighted climate change, biodiversity loss, and societal demands as key innovation drivers.

Experts stressed the value of cross-border collaboration and knowledge sharing, advocating for a balanced role of government and markets. A key point was the impact of the EU Forest Strategy, which, according to analysis, may have inadvertently created policy conflicts between forestry and agriculture, hindering the integration of forestry innovations into rural development strategies. The group concluded that addressing these policy discrepancies and fostering a clearer understanding of forestry innovation is crucial for effective EIP-Agri implementation.



2. Policy Focus Group for South-East Europe

2.1. Main topics addressed

The core topics addressed in the FOREST4EU PFG for South-East Europe focus on fostering innovation and sustainable practices. A key theme involves the sharing of knowledge and experiences gained in successful Operational Groups, crucial for advancing sector-specific solutions. Then, the discussions extensively covered funding opportunities, exploring instruments like the CAP Strategic Plans, aiming to bolster financial support for forestry initiatives. Participants highlighted best practice examples funded by EIP-Agri, showcasing tangible innovation. The urgent need for innovation, driven by climate change and technological advancements, was a recurrent point, as well as national forestry policies and their alignment with the European Green Deal that were also scrutinized, emphasizing their role in promoting sustainable innovation. The reports provided comprehensive overviews of various countries' forestry and agroforestry sectors, detailing challenges, funding prospects, and innovation needs. Survey results for South-East Europe revealed that innovation was deemed paramount for enhancing forest management, integrating new technologies, supporting ecological balance, and increasing adaptive capacity. Furthermore, improvements to the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan and its support mechanisms were discussed. The emergence of markets for ecosystem services as a relevant policy objective for EIP-Agri Operational Groups was a major theme in the PFG for South-East Europe.

2.2. Identified challenges and barriers

A primary challenge is the lack of experience with forestry and agroforestry related Operational Groups, particularly in South-East Europe, hindering innovative project initiation and access to funding. Furthermore, the exclusion of forestry and agroforestry from certain rural funding streams presents a significant obstacle. Country-specific challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, and Serbia underscore the need for tailored solutions, and participants consistently emphasized the urgency for innovation, especially in response to climate change and technological advancements. Improving forest management was identified as a key area for innovation, alongside the adoption of new technologies, ecological support, and enhanced adaptive capacity. Limited cooperation across the forest-based value chain also poses a barrier. These issues collectively illustrate the obstacles that the FOREST4EU project aims to address, fostering innovation and collaboration within the forestry and agroforestry sectors of South-East Europe.

2.3. Potential solutions

The PFG emphasized knowledge sharing through workshops and meetings, aiming to bolster the presence of forestry Operational Groups in South-East Europe. Secondly, it calls for strategic plan revisions to ensure forestry's inclusion in rural funding, employing policy engagement to achieve this. Diversifying funding sources, such as EAFRD, CAP Strategic Plans, and EDF, is deemed crucial.

Promoting innovation, particularly in climate change adaptation and technology implementation, remains a core objective, focusing on improved forest management, technology adoption, ecological support, and adaptive capacity. Aligning national policies with the European Green Deal is essential for fostering innovation. The focus group also champions ecosystem service markets as policy targets for EIP-Agri forestry groups. Enhanced collaboration across the forest value chain is sought, along with data collection and sharing on forestry innovation. Finally, it encourages the development of innovative technologies and approaches to address climate challenges and improve forest management.

2.4. Reflection from the convenor

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Policy Focus Group for South-West Europe

3.1. Main topics addressed

The PFG for South-West Europe engaged in extensive discussions spanning various critical themes. A central focus was the European Green Deal, with participants exploring its ambitious goals for CO₂ reduction, climate adaptation, sustainability, and the bioeconomy, acknowledging the need for transformative change. The group delved into the current state of forestry and agroforestry Operational Groups, identifying gaps and the necessity for increased investment. Innovation within the sector was a key topic, with survey results highlighting the importance of new technologies and sustainable management practices. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and the bioeconomy emerged as primary drivers of innovation. Policy and support mechanisms for innovation were examined, emphasizing the role of government, markets, and local communities. The PFG also addressed the identification and classification of innovations from South-West Europe's OGs, utilizing an online platform for knowledge sharing. Challenges and opportunities for these groups were explored, including ecosystem diversity and ownership structures, alongside the importance of knowledge transfer and collaboration. Discussions extended to upscaling innovations, emphasizing networking, economic support, and data validation. Best practices for OGs, sustainable value chains, and effective communication strategies were also considered.

Furthermore, the group recognized the need for training in digitalization and mechanization, alongside addressing funding delays and bureaucratic hurdles. Governance improvements, transparency, and cross-border collaboration were identified as essential for fostering innovation in agroforestry and forestry.

3.2. Identified challenges and barriers

The PFG identified several critical challenges hindering the sector's progress. A primary concern is the limited number of forestry and agroforestry OGs in European countries. This scarcity impedes knowledge expansion and sustainable practices. National policy objectives often overshadow European Green Deal goals, despite the latter's relevance to climate resilience and biodiversity and the forestry sector is widely perceived as lacking innovation, corroborating existing research. Diverse ecosystems, ownership structures, and policy support across member states further complicate EIP-AGRI group development. Economic viability is a major hurdle, as in Portugal, for instance, soil regeneration efforts face profitability challenges. Stakeholder engagement is hampered by limited skills, time, and motivation. Bureaucratic hurdles, including payment delays and rigid project timelines, also impede progress. Funding constraints limit partner participation, reducing overall impact, and complex bureaucracy discourages project coordination roles, necessitating clearer regional guidelines.



3. Policy Focus Group for South-West Europe

Concerns regarding arbitrary decision-making by regional governments highlight the need for increased transparency and accountability. Finally, despite recognizing its importance, cross-border cooperation remains infrequent due to regional funding allocations.

3.3. Potential solutions

This PFG emphasizes the necessity for increased investment in forestry and agroforestry Operational Groups to foster sustainable practices. Local community engagement in forest restoration, alongside enhanced research, is crucial for broader innovation. Aligning sectoral policies and reducing trade-offs will drive intersectoral innovation. Networking in remote sensing and international collaborations are vital. Demonstrating innovation as problem-solving requires robust data validation and knowledge-sharing networks, supported by public authorities. A cross-skilled advisory system will promote agroforestry. Developing of sustainable value chains and evaluating innovation benefits are the key. Context-specific information is needed for adoption and supporting an entrepreneurial environment and improving communication across stakeholders are critical. Training programs for digitalization and mechanization, with data expertise, are necessary for improving the practitioners' digital skills. Streamlining project execution through advance payments and budget flexibility is urged. Administrative simplification and clear regional policies will enhance efficiency. Transparency and cross-border cooperation are paramount. Knowledge exchange networks and peer-to-peer learning will foster adoption. Interactive learning tools and collaborative stakeholder networks will ensure project success. These solutions aim to build a more sustainable and resilient forest sector in South-West Europe.

3.4. Reflection of the convenor

Reflecting on the discussions, it's clear that bolstering forestry and agroforestry OGs is paramount, particularly given their scarcity. Increased investment is vital to expand knowledge and promote sustainability. We recognized the need for targeted interventions, including advisory systems and sustainable value chain development. Locally adapted information and a supportive business environment are crucial for innovation adoption and communication and training emerged as key areas. Tailored dissemination strategies and digitalization training are more and more essential, and streamlining project execution through pre-payment systems and reduced bureaucracy is necessary, as well as governance improvements, focusing on transparency and consistency. While the bottom-up approach is valued, addressing stakeholder skill and motivation gaps is also important. Furthermore, we emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation. Cross-border and cross-sector collaboration must be fostered through initiatives like knowledge exchange networks and interactive learning tools. Stakeholder partnerships and national workshops will further strengthen cooperation and disseminate best practices. These insights highlight the collective effort required to drive meaningful progress in European forestry and agroforestry.

Some numbers from the Policy Focus Groups:

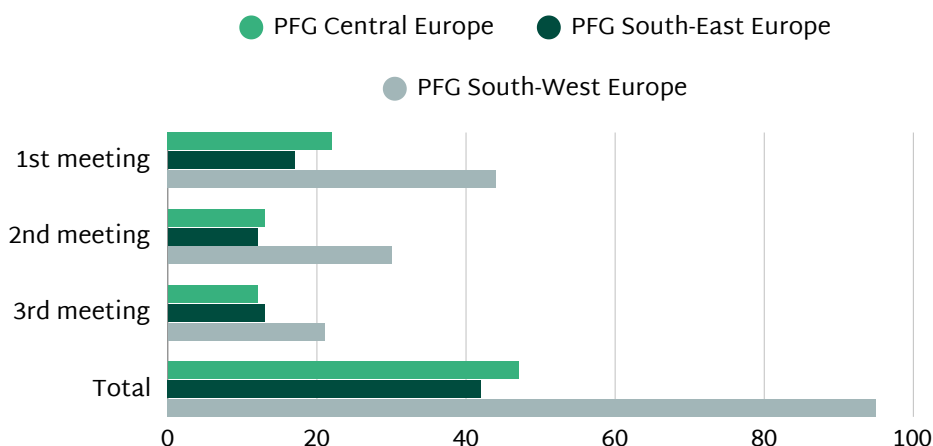


Fig. 1. Number of attendees per PFG

PFG Central Europe: Representatives from government authorities incl. ministries and forest administrations, interest groups, advisory services and research as well as individual forest owners.

PFG South-East Europe: Representatives from government authorities, forest management companies, research and education institutions, development agencies, and forest owner associations.

PFG South-West Europe: Representatives from government authorities and agencies, research, associations and NGOs, private companies as well as practitioners from Operational Groups in forestry and agroforestry.

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Further information:

- [Official website](#)
- [LinkedIn page](#)



About FOREST4EU project

A key objective of FOREST4EU, funded by the Horizon Europe program, is to connect these OGs across Europe, fostering synergies and facilitating the exchange of best practices. The project is actively collecting and disseminating valuable information developed by these OGs, creating a central resource for the forestry community.



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