

Sustainable Growth from the Forest

When speaking of forests, us Finns have a great responsibility. This is because Finland is the most forested country in Europe, more than 75 percent of our surface area is forested. Forests also play a much larger role in the Finnish national economy than in any other country, and this is the reason why our forests have also been managed responsibly. The area of strictly protected forest in Finland is the highest in Europe, both percentually and in terms of surface area.

We know that in many other countries the situation is exactly the opposite. Forests have suffered from excessive felling in past decades, which is why the European forest policy is often based on the idea that forests must be protected.

Finns have an important task to describe the possibilities of sustainable forestry in European forums. Our forests grow much more each year than they are logged. This is how it should be. In recent years, the annual loggings have only amounted to 78 percent of the sustainable logging volume, so the use of wood can easily be increased while ensuring forest diversity through active forest management.

Since wood grows slowly in Finland, we must aim for the highest possible degree of processing in terms of stemwood. Each residual flow should also be processed and utilised.

Wood-based bioproducts form one of the most important branches of industry in the Finnish national economy. The Finnish Bioeconomy Strategy was published already in 2014 and it aims to double the output of the bioeconomy to EUR 100 billion and create 100 000 new jobs in the field by the year 2025.

The bioeconomy can also be called a matter of the people; private individuals own almost two thirds of the productive forest land in Finland. The responsible, sustainable management and use of forests is in the best interests of all parties.

Finland is a pioneer in bioeconomy. The forest industry is seeking new forms of operation, and significant investments are made in the field. New kinds of bioproduct factories and innovation environments have been introduced. Finland has a strong, traditional forest industry and world-class forest research, which provide a solid body of experience for building new, multidisciplinary innovation activities. Residual flows should generate products with high added value.

Wood-based innovations respond to the challenges of many global megatrends, such as climate change, resource scarcity and urbanisation. Promoting bio- and circular economy is highly important throughout the EU, and the demand for products manufactured from renewable raw materials is constantly growing.

All too often, bioeconomy is perceived only as bioenergy, particularly in international forums. However, it is much more than this. Wood-based raw materials are already utilised in fibres, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, functional foods, plastics, cosmetics, smart packaging and bio-oil, among others. The environment benefits, because wood-based solutions are often produced with less energy and raw materials, and the used materials can easily be recycled. At the same time, raw materials that consume natural resources and are harmful to the environment can be replaced.

The demand for environmentally friendly packaging, for example, is on the rise. Due to global urbanisation, more than half of the world's population is living in cities. Urbanisation and digitalisation result in an increase in online shopping, and the long shipping distances of goods require new packaging properties. Containers made from wood fibre are recyclable, and smart packaging helps to extend the products' lifecycle. Lighter packaging materials save energy and the environment and make logistics easier.

Wood-based innovations offer solutions to changes in the demography and the health care sector, such as medicine packages and hygiene products for hospitals and home care service providers. The medicinal and health-promoting qualities of wood can also be utilised when processing it for the pharmaceutical and the functional food industry.

We can also dress in wood. Wood-based textile fibres pave the way towards an ecological clothing industry, and allow more cotton fields to be used for food production worldwide. All of these new wood-based products rely on persistent research and product development, which should be invested in even more heavily in the future. In order to encourage businesses to invest, us politicians must be capable of drafting long-term, predictable legislation and ensuring market performance.

Although forest policy is the responsibility of decision-makers at a national level in the EU Member States, the European climate and energy policies have a major effect on Finnish forestry and the development of bioeconomy. The European Union is currently deliberating roughly ten Commission proposals that aim to reduce emissions, increase energy efficiency and self-sufficiency and improve the market. It is important for Finland that our message concerning the possibilities of sustainable forestry is reflected in these policies.

We face a large, practically borderless market. Wood-based products and solutions could boost Finland back to becoming a leader in innovations in the world. As Speaker of Parliament Riitta Uosukainen, whom I greatly respect, summed it up in her time, Finns only have their woods and their heads. They can lend wings to our success also in the future.

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