The Green lungs of Europe: new project will enable smart decisions for sustainable forest management

For immediate release - Amsterdam, March 15, 2023 – Forests are key in the European fight against climate change, absorbing twice as much carbon as they emit each year. We have been dramatically reminded last summer by both heatwaves (which enduring effects were worsened in urbanised areas where nature was cut out) and forest fires with devastating impacts and consequences on life and nature all around the world. With the European Parliament adopting new carbon sinks goal that increases EU 2030 climate ambition just days ago under the regulation on land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF), and the International Day of Forests around the corner (March 21), we launch the European project OptFor-EU that will support EU forests in their capacity to mitigate and adapt to climate change. How? From science to practice, with a user-centred Decision Support System (DSS) assisting decision-making in 8 case studies throughout European forests.

Many wondered last summer, when fires were raging all across Europe, what comes next, what happens once the fires are put out? Scientists and forest practitioners have called for the need for resilience approaches, key to understand and plan: which species do we plant back where? how do you adapt to the fires from inside the forests, but also from the communities' perspective? What other pressures do forests deal with? What happens for unmanaged forests? We need to change the way forests are integrated in our territories and consider them in land planning. Improving forest management practices is a key focus of the new EU-funded project OptFor-EU, covering all 14 European forest types, and over 3 million hectares of forest including 1.84 million hectares of protected areas. OptFor-EU, acronym for "*OPTimising FORest management decisions for a low-carbon, climate resilient future in EUrope*" aims to co-develop **with** forest managers and other forest stakeholders a Decision Support System that provides them with suitable climate adaptation and mitigation options for science-based optimising forest ecosystem services (FES) (including decarbonisation) across Europe.

OptFor-EU builds on state-of-the-art datasets, modelling outputs and integrated solutions to provide the first DSS that will enable forest managers to obtain an enhanced understanding of current and future possible changes in forest processes, ecosystem services, vulnerabilities, costs, and adaptive capacities for a range of Forest Management Practices, and socioeconomic and climate scenarios. The DSS will incorporate ready-to-use products, services and guidance with an overarching focus on achieving the goals of the European Green Deal and New EU Forest Strategy. This tool will support the conservation and enhancement of the Earth's natural carbon sinks in forests, addressing the priorities and objectives of the Horizon Programme's Land, ocean and water for climate action.

With both local- and EU-scale inputs, the outcome provided by the DSS will enable European forest stakeholders to select management practices that are most appropriate for achieving their specific goals, such as, but not limited to:

(i)   mitigating and adapting to climate change,
(ii)   maintaining and increasing biodiversity,
(iii)   boosting circular forest economy,
(iv)   adopting Nature Based Solutions,
(v)   integrating socio-economic considerations, and
(vi)   forest protection and restoration, through afforestation and reforestation.

The 4-year project is implemented by 16 partners from 9 countries (research entities, associations, and SMEs) who will work together on management practices, ecosystem service provision and CO_2 sink provided by forests, enhancing forest resilience and its capacities to mitigate climate change, with a focus on 8 case studies in Norway, Lithuania, The UK, Germany, Austria, Romania, Spain and Italy.

The project will deliver tools, recommendations and knowledge on the ground, with a summer school and 24 workshops, aiming to engage over 400 Forest practice stakeholders. It will combine an iterative process of data consolidation, modelling, and co-development of solutions alongside forest managers and other practice stakeholders as well as policymakers in all European Forest Types to empower final forest end-users, as well as improve the resilience and decarbonisation of forests.

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Partners