



Why Europe cannot rely on forests to meet its climate targets

EU Climate Law negotiators must keep emission reductions and forest protection as separate targets and agree to cut pollution by 65% over the next ten years.

Forests play a vital role as carbon sinks in efforts to avoid catastrophic climate change. They are essential for all life on Earth. They need protection so that they continue to absorb carbon from the atmosphere and remain healthy and full of life.

But this protection must take place in addition, not instead of cutting pollution from sectors such as transport and agriculture, both major and growing emitters.

A three-letter word that would undermine Europe's action on climate

In December, EU leaders agreed that Europe should cut its carbon emissions by at least 55% over the next ten years. While a leap forward from the current 40%, it is not in line with the EU's fair share of global climate action to achieve the Paris climate goals. This would require at least a 65% reduction in emissions by 2030.

Furthermore, this 55% is a "net" target. The "net" means that governments can choose to delay actual emission reductions so long as they for example plant trees. That is a dangerous bet. The pollution from human activities will stay in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. But carbon stored in a tree can be released at any time due to fires, pests, logging. With the ever warmer climate, the risks facing our forests grow by the day.

Tomorrow, policymakers from the European Parliament, EU governments and the EU Commission meet again to try to find an agreement on the EU climate law that defines Europe's new climate target for 2030.

Legislators at the Parliament call for a 60% target and have explicitly rejected the idea of combining emission reductions and carbon removals in one target. The EU Commission and national governments continue to push for it.

The EU would need a deal before US President Biden's "Climate Leader Summit" where big global emitters are expected to announce new climate commitments. But the three institutions' views are still quite far apart and an agreement next week seems unlikely. The Commission's



“Fit for 55” climate and energy package, expected in June, also requires a deal sooner rather than later.

Markets unlikely to promote forest protection

The Commission is also floating the idea of bringing forestry under the EU’s carbon market. This would allow big emitters to continue to pollute as long as they pay farmers and forest owners to protect their lands so that they would absorb more carbon.

The Commission seems to assume that selling such “offsets” will incentivise the restoration of ecosystems. But temporary absorption of carbon in forests and soils is simply not the same as permanently reducing fossil fuel emissions.

There is simply also not enough space on our planet to plant enough trees to remove the carbon dioxide emitted by fossil fuel corporations.

Taking carbon out of the atmosphere can be only a small part of the climate solution and only for those emissions that cannot be avoided.

We need to both cut pollution AND remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere

At the policy level, all this means that we need two separate targets - one for reducing emissions and another one for protecting forests - and we need to keep carbon removals out of the EU carbon market.

As the EU legislators head for their next round of talks on the EU Climate Law, we, therefore, urge them first of all to agree on a strong short-term “gross” target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. Additionally, they need to support a target and a plan for how much we would like our forests and land to be absorbing carbon in the future.

For more information, see [NGO letter](#) to EU leaders calling for separate targets for Europe’s climate action and forest protection.