



TO:

Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans
European Green Deal
European Commission
1040 Brussels
Belgium

Brussels, 02/07/2021

Subject: NEW EU FOREST STRATEGY - POST 2020

Dear EVP Timmermans,

The European Association of Remote Sensing Companies (EARSC) very much welcomes the efforts of the European Commission in protecting, restoring and enlarging forests in Europe and worldwide. The upcoming EU Forest Strategy is not only timely, but absolutely necessary to ensuring sustainable forest management for healthy, biodiverse and climate change resilient forest ecosystems.

According to the FAO SDG Indicator 15.1.1, a net area of 1.78 million square kilometers of forest have been lost worldwide between 1990 and 2020 (representing a decrease from 32.5 to 30.8 %), as a result of man-made and natural disasters, with causes ranging from illegal logging and overgrazing for infrastructure development and agriculture to wildfires, storms, droughts and diseases. About 4.9 million hectares of the EU forests are 'primary' or 'old-growth' forests, according to a new report by the EU's Joint Research Centre. These are forests that follow natural dynamics, exist in their original condition and are largely untouched by human interference. They are the natural heritage of Europe, as the ancient temples are for our culture. Although 4.9 million hectares may seem vast, these forest types are in fact rare, small and fragmented, only making up 3% of the EU's total forested area and 1.2% of the EU land. Protecting them is vital for preserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change.

With forests in the EU generally showing strong signs of declining carbon sink capacity, increasing damages and declining rates of area expansion, it is critical that governments at all levels be equipped with the right tools to protect and restore these carbon-rich ecosystems, particularly all remaining primary and old-growth forests in the EU, as set out in the EU Nature Restoration Plan. Due to climate change, the whole forest area in Europe is at risk, not just primary forests or old-growth plantations. The change in rainfall patterns is causing tree diseases, which bring fewer and smaller leaves, less carbon storage capacity, more frequent pests, larger forest fires and, in general, a degradation of forest ecosystems. Appropriately measuring carbon stocks and mitigating emissions from land use sectors is critical to effective climate action, and also to ensuring the sustainable stewardship of forestry, grasslands, agricultural areas, and other natural resources.

Europe has made an ambitious commitment to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The European Union's Green Deal published in 2019 supports this effort via several main pillars of action, of which 2.1.7. *Preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity* deals with not only the

EU's forested areas and improved management of these ecosystems, but also notes the importance of addressing deforestation globally. The role of remote sensing for forest monitoring has been adopted by the Paris Agreement.

In this critical context, the unprecedented digital tools and data being provided by the Copernicus Earth Observation Programme, combined with the European industry's unique analytical know-how and technological skills - as widely demonstrated within Europe and worldwide - are the foundational pillars to build upon for acting, monitoring, protecting and restoring our forests, now and at scale.

Earth Observation data and services derived from that data play a crucial role particularly in tracking changes to the extent, health and ecological condition of Europe's forests in a spatially **explicit way - you cannot manage what you do not see!** In this respect, remote sensing offers unique capabilities that ground-based in-situ data simply cannot deliver. Typically, remote sensing delivers high-revisit frequency, high-transparency, wide-area coverage at high precision and in a cost-efficient way, whilst powering automated analyses at scale. All of these features are essential for policy development, implementation, and measure tracking.

As satellite data sources are constantly expanding, an EU-wide monitoring system with a complete forest inventory, powered by the Copernicus Programme and commercial space technologies, would be a **game changer in making forest changes visible and actionable** and, thus, should be seen as an essential and legitimate tool for forest management. The technology is there, and is already today operationally used in many countries and regions worldwide. Furthermore, spanning from high-quality imagery to AI-powered data analytics, Earth Observation technology can provide detailed information on large areas to allow researchers and policy-makers to identify risks and tailor their responses. At the EU level, providing regular, standardized and homogeneous measurements across member states would facilitate tracking and comparing country performances against EU targets. At the international level, the EU would establish a standard practice to be followed.

EU institutions and Member States should have access to the best-possible data, from multiple sources, on the state of Europe's forests. This is essential to meet the goals of the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and the new EU Forest Strategy. The benefits of a centralized system complemented with commercial data are clear. This can ensure that forest cover and condition change is automatically detected, classified and actionable, down to the individual tree level where needed.

Moreover, this new EU Forest Strategy has the potential to not only meet climate policy objectives, but also create sustainable innovation and economic opportunity. EU-wide monitoring systems represent significant and sustainable economic development opportunities for downstream applications in fields as diverse as research, science, and education; Earth Observation and remote sensing; AI, big data science and analyses; agriculture, forestry, and natural resource management.

EVP Timmermans, surely we all agree that Earth is facing an environmental emergency. Thus, the policies put in place need to look beyond the individual interests and focus on the big picture, which requires an immediate action. Biodiversity loss and climate change are real and will have lasting effects on humans, animals and the environment. **There is an urgency to act and we have the tools in hand to take action. Now, at scale and with unprecedented local precision.** Therefore, we urge you to take advantage of these existing tools and include their utilization as part of the EU Forest Strategy.

The Earth Observation sector can significantly help. Together with other commercial operators, downstream service companies and Copernicus Sentinel missions, a powerful Earth Observation

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ecosystem must be created to have a real and timely impact on Earth that is urgently needed given the current state of the planet.

Yours faithfully,

Marc TONDRIAUX

Chairman of EARSC.




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