

Growing potential?

The bioeconomy can help the EU to meet its renewable energy targets, but the role to be played by Europe's forests is under scrutiny.

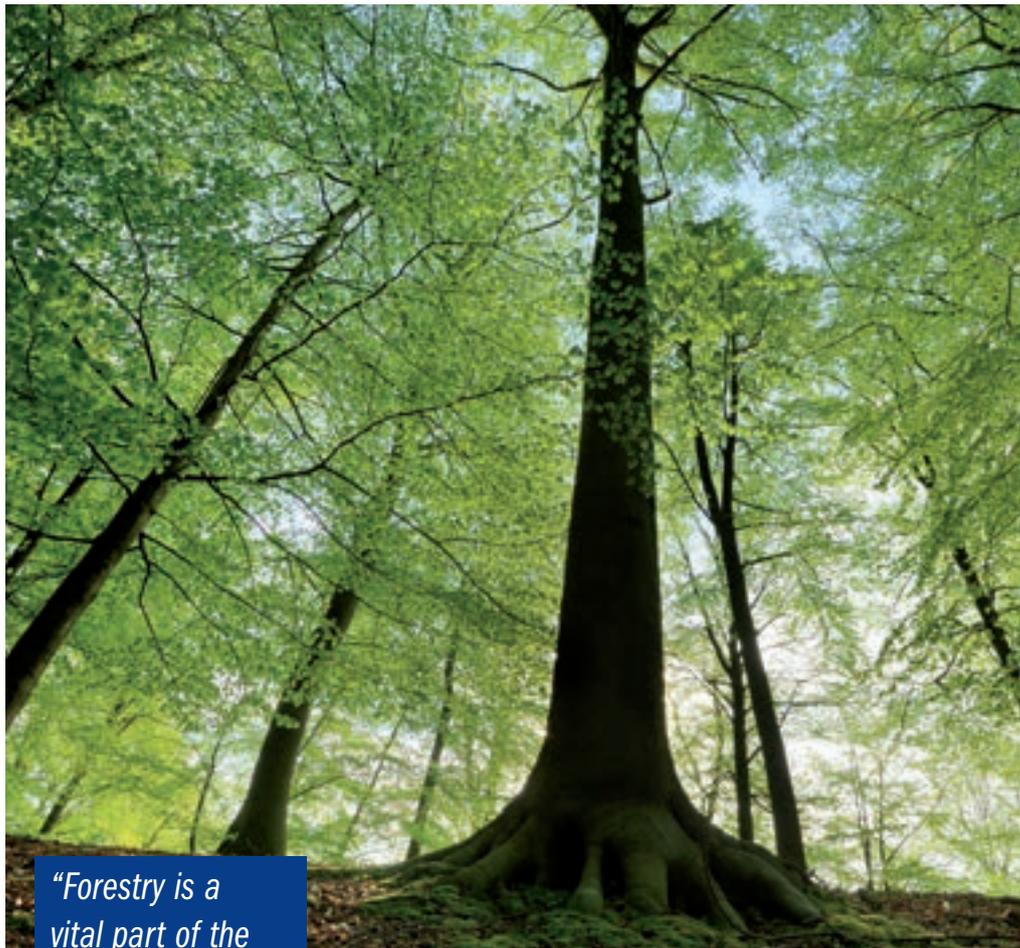
Kayleigh Lewis reports

Containing 155 million hectares of forests and 21 million hectares of other wooded land, the European Union is currently home to five per cent of the world's forests. More than 42 per cent of the EU's land area is made up of forests or wooded areas, and such a big resource is hard to ignore as Europe seeks to find an alternative to a petroleum fuelled society.

The commission believes that the bioeconomy, that is an economy which is based around the smart use of biological and renewable resources, can help Europe to become more resource efficient. It also believes that more reliance on renewable biological resources can help to meet consumer and industry demands while, at the same time, tackling climate change. However, the commission's forestry strategy, currently under review and expected to be adopted this year, highlights some of the challenges currently facing the EU's forests. These include the increase in demand for forestry biomass, a result of Europe-wide renewable energy policies.

The renewable energy directive, adopted by member states in 2009, introduced a 20 per cent target for renewable energy, with 50 per cent of this coming from biomass, much of which will be from wood. Richard Wainwright, communications manager at FERN, told this magazine, "There are very limited forest resources left, each of which are already dealing with competing demands. Renewable energy targets always focus on increasing demand for resources rather than looking at what forests can sustain- →

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Other concerns highlighted in the forestry strategy include climate change mitigation and adaption, the forestry sector’s contribution to bioenergy and the need for increased cooperation between member states and at EU level on forestry policies. Statistics show that the EU’s forests have expanded continuously for the last 60 years, according to the European commission, although the rate of growth has declined in recent times. There are concerns from those in the environmental sector that forests across Europe could be over-exploited as policymakers shift their focus to biomass and the bioeconomy. However, as the commission points out, the EU’s bioeconomy employs 22 million people and turns over €2 trillion annually, therefore its implications already reach beyond the environmental sector, and so the need to ensure that the bioeconomy remains sustainable is increasingly important.

Dutch MEP Judith Merkies, said, “The European bio-

economy represents nine per cent of the jobs in the EU. Innovation can foster this sector and spur competition. As a shadow rapporteur on the ‘A bioeconomy for Europe’ report, I tried to incorporate two important elements: sustainable use of biomass (cascading) and room for innovation. It is crucial that biomass is used to its highest application where possible. Edible food should not end up in fuel tanks, as little as biomass that can be used for high end chemicals should be used for ceiling tiles. Therefore I’ve proposed a food hierarchy in the bioeconomy for Europe report,” she told the Parliament Magazine.

The S&D deputy continued, “The bioeconomy can help Europe to move towards a more sustainable and less fossil fuel dependent economy. But in order to meet this ambition, we should think about what kind of bioeconomy we want. The bioeconomy should not merely substitute the current fossil-based economy or repeat current wasteful behaviour and consumption patterns but should evolve into a more efficient and sustainable model.” “Forestry is a vital part of the bioeconomy, albeit overlooked by a lot of policymakers. I was the only MEP to table amendments to include forestry. It

is of paramount importance that the wood and paper industry is being taken on board when we try to build on a sustainable and innovative bioeconomy for Europe,” Merkies stressed.

Wainwright agreed that certain uses of biomass should be given priority, saying, “We believe that policies to ensure the bioeconomy benefits the climate and society positively must be built on analysis of available biomass in Europe and beyond. Agreements should then be made about the hierarchy of use, and which industries should get prioritised access. Biomass should only be burnt once it has fulfilled all of its other functions.” He continued, “Biomass does have a carbon debt – although it is possible to re-grow it, this will take years and in the meantime this means more carbon in the atmosphere, all policies need to take this into account.” But Merkies said, “For now, a lot of applications are available only on a small scale. Therefore, I tried to focus my proposal on bridging the road from lab to market, evading the so-called valley of death. I am also a champion of a one stop shop, a central point where citizens and stakeholders can turn to if they have questions or ideas related to the bioeconomy.” ★