



# Preliminary research findings: Sustainable Forest Management in the EU

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# Introduction

## Overview of the research TASK:

- Analyse Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) definitions in legal or regulatory frameworks or practices in EU Member States. Based on SFM definitions, identify elements that implement Closer-to-Nature Forestry (CNF) principles.

## Objective:

- To compile and analyse information on SFM in the Member States, comparing definitions and their implementation through criteria, indicators, targets and practices.
  - Focusing on Criteria 2 (Forest ecosystem health & vitality) and 4 (biological diversity) of the Helsinki resolution & Forest Europe (FE) definition of SFM.
- Identify to what extent the implementation of SFM aligns with Closer-to-Nature forestry (guidelines) in the Member States.

## Country scope:

- Nearly all EU-27 Member States, except for CY, MT, and LU.

## Approach:

- Desk research (e.g. government policy and strategic documents, national and regional regulatory frameworks, and laws).
- Expert interviews (e.g. government officials).

# Defining SFM

## Most Member States have an official SFM definition

- Definitions are often based on the 1993 Helsinki resolution (e.g. BG) or they reference the Forest Europe (FE) definition and criteria (e.g. IE, SE).
- National definitions can be found in legislation, planning or strategic policy documents.
- Little evidence that definitions are adopted through participatory processes.
- Links and synergies between strategic or policy documents on SFM are often unclear.

## Common elements in SFM definitions include:

- Three pillars: ecological (fauna, flora, soil, water), economic (viable exploitation), and social (stakeholder benefits).
- Maintaining biodiversity, productivity, vitality of forests, and regenerative capacity.

## There are still clear differences in how countries approach defining SFM

- **BG:** Emphasises the use of forests while maintaining their functions and capacities.
- **SI:** Focuses on a closer-to-nature approach, emphasising preservation and increasing diversity of indigenous species.
- **ES** and other MS with recently adopted strategies (e.g. IE) tend to refer to CNF; and
- **SE:** A unique case, where the Swedish Forest Agency proposes a definition for 'sustainable development in the forest' with a sustainable growth target, rather than traditional SFM.

# Criteria and indicators for SFM

## The Forest Europe definition and criteria are broadly accepted and used by most EU Member States

- Despite this common basis, there is still significant variation in how countries operationalise these criteria through indicators, objectives, and targets, which are often vague.
- Several Member States (e.g. BG, CZ, IE, ES, PT) have developed indicators linked to criteria used by the FE definition. For example:
  - **PT:** Specific indicators used to verify fulfilment of some FE Criterion, including 2 and 4.
  - **BG:** Indicators linked to the use of forests as well as targets linked to forest certification schemes (e.g., FSC or PEFC).
  - **ES:** Indicators covering all FE criteria and linked to national forestry legislation. Includes some quantitative objectives of a general nature.
  - **IE:** Criteria and indicators are linked to the FE criteria, often going beyond them.
  - **SE:** Indicators linked to FE criteria, plus targets for sustainable forest growth.
- Even so, not all Member States have developed specific indicators or targets linked to the FE criteria.

**There is a distinct lack of clear quantitative targets to determine how or whether the Member States are achieving SFM**

# Criteria and indicators for SFM (2)

**There is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing SFM criteria and indicators in the EU:**

- The level at which SFM criteria and indicators are applied and enforced varies significantly across EU Member States, reflecting the diversity of governance structures and division of competencies within countries.
  - **BE:** The Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) are responsible for forests and forest management, each with their own frameworks for SFM.
  - **ES:** The Autonomous Communities have the competence to develop Forest Resource Management Plans and to define SFM indicators.
  - **IE:** SFM criteria, indicators, and measures are applied nationally by the Forestry Division of Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine.
  - **SI:** SFM criteria and indicators are set nationally, while targets are at the management plan level.

**The legal status of SFM criteria and indicators also varies between countries**

- In some cases, such as Belgium's Regions or Spain's Autonomous Communities, the criteria and indicators are enshrined in law and are legally binding.
- In other instances, they may be set out in national strategies or planning documents without full legal force.

# Targets and thresholds

## **Quantitative thresholds or targets for implementing SFM are not widely used by EU Member States**

- No systematic quantitative targets have been identified in any of the countries studied for implementation of their SFM criteria.
- While countries have largely embraced the principles of SFM, they have been more cautious in setting concrete, measurable goals.
- There are certain examples of targets, albeit limited:
  - **ES:** The Galician Forest Resource Management Plan sets targets for forest area to be certified under the FSC system, with a goal of 650,000 hectares by 2040 and interim targets every 5 years.
  - **PT:** The Portuguese Standard on Sustainable Forest Management Systems does not include absolute requirements for forestry performance, but rather the forest unit manager defines the objectives, taking into account their legal obligations.
  - **CZ:** The Ministry of Agriculture (2016) Strategy includes loosely defined 'indicative' targets related to forest area under biological and chemical soil rehabilitation measures and for reducing ungulate populations.
- Where quantitative targets have been set, they often focus on regional contexts or narrow aspects of SFM. Targets are not consistent or systematic.

# Compliance with Closer-to-Nature Forestry

**Certain aspects of CNF are achieved by implementing SFM in the Member States, but alignment with CNF guidelines is not consistent, in part due to:**

- The highly inconsistent use of indicators and targets for measuring and implementing SFM in the Member States.
- SFM targets and thresholds are often vague and rarely quantifiable or tied to specific dates.

**Some Member States have made more progress than others in integrating CNF into their SFM criteria and indicators. Alignment is varied:**

- **SI:** SFM definition and indicators focus on forest preservation, biodiversity, and protective functions, often demonstrating strong alignment with CNF principles.
- **SE:** Authorities propose a definition of close-to-nature forestry, whose purpose is ‘to strengthen the role of forests in sustainable development’.
- **ES:** Different targets in the same document: aims to increase afforested forest area by at least 0.6 million hectares, achieve a reforestation rate of 20,000 ha/year, and increase forest use and extraction rate to at least 50% of annual growth, up from the current 37%.
- **IT:** Many SFM criteria and indicators align with CNF: protecting and recovering riparian, lowland, and coastal forests, and conserving forest ecosystems, with a 5-year review.
- **IE:** The implementing ‘measures’ of their SFM criteria and indicators align with CNF in many respects.

# Compliance with Closer-to-Nature Forestry (2)

**Implementation of SFM by Member States did not consistently reflect a CNF approach. Certain aspects of CNF were often not considered:**

- Promoting natural tree regeneration and ensuring respectful harvest conditions.
- Minimising management interventions (e.g. pesticides) and optimising deadwood retention.

**Gaps and challenges identified in adopting a CNF approach:**

- An overall lack of quantitative targets for implementing or measuring progress toward SFM, many of which are not related to CNF principles.
- Certain Member States still emphasise the need to increase forest use and extraction rates.
- The lack of compensation for potential loss of income during the transition to CNF. Additional costs incurred may be due to:
  - Increased environmental considerations and harvest restrictions;
  - Forestry practices with less harvesting over a long period may impact income.

**Examples of low alignment between SFM and CNF in Member States:**

- Limitations in the ability to achieve natural regeneration and rich species diversity.
- An approach focused on sustainable forest growth (e.g. SE).



# Compliance with Closer-to-Nature Forestry (3)

## Progress in adopting CNF practices varies across EU Member States

- Some countries demonstrate strong alignment with CNF by implementing SFM through their criteria, indicators, or measures.
- Others face challenges in fully integrating CNF principles.
- Yet, no Member State is fully aligned in adopting a CNF approach to forest management.

## Future opportunities to enhance CNF adoption will be aided by:

- Providing Member States with a baseline for implementing their SFM criteria in compliance with CNF principles and practices.
- This baseline should take the form of clear and quantifiable: indicators, targets, thresholds, or ranges associated with their respective SFM criteria.

# Conclusion and Next Steps

## Preliminary Key Findings

- Most EU Member States have adopted SFM definitions, often based on the Forest Europe criteria, but there are significant differences in implementation.
- Member States often have general SFM criteria and indicators, as well as a lack of clear quantitative targets for measuring implementation or progress.
- The lack of specific targets to implement SFM with a CNF approach may leave too much up to forest managers to decide the forest management practices.
- Implementation of SFM reflects some aspects of CNF, but alignment is inconsistent and varies between Member States.
- This inconsistency seems to indicate a need for specific targets linking SFM to CNF.

## Next Steps

- Continue analysing the national research collected.
- Synthesise findings into a report, capturing:
  - SFM across the EU: Criteria, indicators, and targets, performance & gaps.
  - Recommendations for new SFM criteria, indicators and targets aligned with CNF.

**Thank you**  
Any questions?

