

EDITORIAL

WHAT DOES CROATIAN FORESTRY SOCIETY EXPECT FROM THE FUTURE GOVERNMENT?

Since parliamentary elections are to be held in April this year, we would like to publicly announce what Croatian Forestry Society, as a professional and guild association, expects from the future government of the Republic of Croatia, with the purpose of further advancing sustainable forest management and the development of the forestry and wood technology sector.

1. Putting back the term “forestry” in the name of the relevant ministry

It has been more than a decade (since the beginning of 2012) since the term “forestry” disappeared from the name of the relevant ministry. The forestry profession has constantly warned about this and has officially requested several times that the term “forestry” is put back into the name of the ministry. Not only for symbolical reasons, but also because this indicates how much the state values the forestry profession, which takes care of almost half of Croatia’s land area covered by forests and forest land.

Forestry in Croatia has been providing organized activities for almost 260 years. Throughout this time, it has established and preserved natural forests, provided generations of people with employment, supplied them with timber and non-timber products, made forested areas suitable for living in all parts of the country, enabled the development of forestry entrepreneurship and wood industry in rural areas, funded numerous infrastructure projects of local communities through the so-called forest rent, provided education for pupils and students, and developed tourism, along with numerous other public non-market functions and services of forest ecosystems, such as preserving biological diversity, water purification and flow regulation, erosion and flood protection, carbon sequestration from the atmosphere into woody biomass, etc.

2. Establishment of a market system for selling timber products from state forests and the improvement of the status of forestry professionals

For years, the current system of selling timber products from state forests, based on multi-year contracts for allocated quantities at a fixed price, has been generating lower revenue for Croatian Forests Ltd., the company managing state forests. This is due to non-market prices that at the same time increase the profit of private wood industry companies, which are mostly foreign-owned and provide low salaries for their workers. Therefore, it is necessary to estab-

lish a market system for selling timber products through auctions, such as those existing in almost all EU countries and Croatia’s neighbouring countries, regardless of contracts for raw material quantities.

This would enable an increase in salaries for all employees in Croatian Forests Ltd., make forestry as a profession more attractive, encourage the development of rural areas, and retain rural population. The wood industry needs to be supported by some other economic measures because providing low prices of timber materials has not resulted in its progress. Croatian forestry professionals, who despite numerous problems and challenges in forest management, such as severe weather, diseases, pests, and fires, manage to provide stable and positive work, producing top-quality products in high demand on Croatian and international markets, deserve better salaries because their products could be sold at much higher prices than the current ones. Also, they are engaged in one of the most difficult jobs, for which it is increasingly challenging to attract young professionals and quality workers, who will ensure the future sustainability of forest management in Croatia.

3. Strategic and legislative strengthening of the forestry, hunting, and wood industry sectors

The Directorate for Forestry, Hunting and Wood Industry, as part of the relevant ministry, is the top of the pyramid that, with the help of all significant forestry institutions in Croatia, should consider and strategically shape the future of forestry and the related activities. Since there has been an increasing expansion of legal and other frameworks imposed on these activities due to numerous extraordinary circumstances such as climate change, extreme weather conditions, fires, diseases, pests, as well as an increasing demand for the protection of old forests, endangered species and forest ecosystems, it is necessary in the preparation of legal, sublegal, project, and strategic documents of the Republic of Croatia and the EU to employ the best knowledge and ideas in order to ensure sustainable development of these sectors for the benefit of the entire society in Croatia, following the example of the most developed EU countries.

4. Restoring tax for non-market forest functions (NMFF) to the former value and equal distribution of NMFF funds for all purposes

Tax for non-market forest functions, introduced at the end of the 1990s, has almost lost its original purpose due to nu-

merous amendments to the Forest Law to date. It is mostly not applied to forest management but to demining and equipping firefighting operations. Today, forests are increasingly threatened by invasive diseases and pests, extreme weather conditions, fires, and other negative impacts of climate change. The contribution of the community, as well as of the entire economy, to forest protection and restoration is more than necessary. In that context, the EU has adopted a programme to plant 3 billion new trees. Reducing the tax of NMFF and increasing the income threshold for which NMFF is paid constantly reduces the amount of funds paid for NMFF, and does not significantly relieve entrepreneurs.

Since in the EU forest strategy, NMFF tax in Croatia is cited as an example of good practice in the EU, we believe that the tax should be reintroduced for all companies, that a NMFF fund should be established, annual reports on the use of NMFF funds should be publicly published, and the NMFF rate based on real needs and costs in the last 5-10 years should be calculated, based on what the funds were intended for. An example of similar practice is the Austrian Forest Fund, introduced several years ago, whose purpose is to help the forestry sector when necessary. Likewise, we expect that the forestry sector be treated at least equally as other sectors such as agriculture and water management, which receive incentives and funding. While the NMFF tax has constantly decreased, tax for renewable energy sources

has increased. We believe that forest restoration after fires should be fully funded from the NMFF tax, thus fully implementing the Forest Law that prescribes it.

5. Suspension of leasing of forest land and control of the existing situation

According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Croatia, about 60,000 hectares of forest land have been leased for pasture so far, while another 60,000 hectares of forest land are planned to be leased. The uncontrolled movement of cattle often leads to the degradation of surrounding forests, as well as the degradation of uncultivated forest land, the decrease of natural biodiversity in forests, reduced yields of forest products, problems with natural forest regeneration, and the inability to control domestic animals in forests. The history of pasture farming has taught us that such actions are unsustainable and unprofessional considering the purpose of forests and the goals of forestry, especially in the context of huge areas of uncultivated agricultural land which exist for that purpose.

On many occasions it has been written about the aforementioned subjects in the editorials of the Forestry Journal because these issues occupy Croatian foresters and therefore should be improved to the benefit of the entire forestry, Croatian economy, and all people in Croatia.

Editorial Board