

# EDITORIAL

## *DEFORESTATION AND DEVALUATION OF FORESTS IN CROATIA LEADS TO THE COLLAPSE OF FOREST SUSTAINABILITY, FOREST ECOSYSTEM SERVICES, AND THEIR MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROLE*

According to the current Forest Act, deforestation is the felling of all or almost all trees and/or their shrubby forms in a forest for the purpose of implementing spatial plans or constructing forest infrastructure. Deforestation can be permitted in the manner prescribed by law: for the construction of forest infrastructure, if the forest or forest land needs to be repurposed for the interests of the Republic of Croatia, if required for national security and defense, for the implementation of spatial development interventions in accordance with spatial planning documents, and for the construction of buildings that, according to the spatial plan or specific regulations, may be built outside construction zones.

With the latest amendments to the Forest Act in March 2024, deforestation was additionally allowed for the purpose of preserving habitat types and habitats of species of interest to the European Union in degraded stands of garrigue and scrub. During the public consultation and at the session of the Committee on Agriculture of the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian Forestry Society warned about the illogicality and danger of such a provision. Garrigue and scrub are degraded forms that originated from forests which historically grew in those habitats. They are living proof that forests are the original vegetation on those sites. Their deforestation only increases barren areas of forest land. Our objection was not accepted, and thus we reached a historical absurdity. For the first time in the 260-year history of Croatian forestry, the Forest Act enables the clearing of degraded forest forms, prevents forest progression, and facilitates the creation and maintenance of barren areas on forest land.

The historical absurdities do not end there, as the devaluation of forests followed. In 2019, the relevant Ministry passed a decision to reduce the value coefficient used to determine compensation for certain silvicultural forms of forest stands. The decision reduced the compensation for the diminished forest ecosystem services during the exclusion of forests and forest land owned by the Republic of Croatia from the forest management area. For thickets, scrub, maquis, and garrigue, the value coefficient was reduced by 90%; for forest cultures and plantations, by 50%; and for seed-origin forests on Mediterranean karst and coppices, by 30%. For high silvicultural forms—namely, seed-origin forests in continental areas—the value coefficient was not changed at that time.

Finally, in March 2025, the month when we celebrate the International Day of Forests, the Ministry of Agriculture adopted an amendment to the regulation on determining compensation for forests and forest land. This amendment reduced the compensation by 99% in cases of donating property to local and regional self-government units and to state administration bodies for the purpose of exclusion from the forest management area of the Republic of Croatia. This applies to the entire compensation, which includes parts for the forest (timber stock), forest land, and for the reduction of forest ecosystem services. This effectively legalized the repurposing of forests for just 1% of the total compensation amount.

It should be remembered that the entire concept of compensation for forests, forest land, and the reduction of forest ecosystem services was designed so that everyone would be aware of their great value, multifunctional role, and the need to compensate for lost forest areas. This especially applied to degraded forests that do not have valuable timber stock but are proven to have high public benefit value. The compensation paid was intended to allow the state, through the public company of special interest—Croatian Forests Ltd.—to establish a new forest on the same or larger area and to restore forests after fires, thereby maintaining the fundamental principle of forest sustainability. This approach, and the reduction of financial compensation, practically makes this impossible.

The adoption of provisions that expand the possibilities for deforestation and devaluation of forests directly undermines the principles of sustainability, forest ecosystem services, and their multifunctional role. Forest ecosystem services are reflected in soil protection from erosion, torrents, and floods, regulation of the water regime and hydro-energy system, improvement of soil fertility and agricultural production, positive influence on the climate, protection and enhancement of the human environment, oxygen production, air purification, landscape beautification, creation of special conditions for rest and recreation, development of tourism and hunting, and preservation of biodiversity and the gene pool.

It seems that only foresters are aware of this.

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