

## Statement by the Interreg CE BEECH POWER project on the occasion of the EU Forest Strategy open consultation period

The Interreg CE BEECH POWER project welcomes the EU's goal to adopt a Forest Strategy that accounts for the immense importance and benefits that forests have, especially in a future dominated by climate change. We agree that there is "a need for a comprehensive strategy to ensure that forests are addressed in a consistent manner across the different policies". Old-growth forests take an outstanding role in this as they provide a plethora of ecosystem services that are invaluable for our wellbeing. Therefore, it is crucial to protect existent old-growth forests and extend protected forests as promised in the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Nevertheless, old-growth forests, including beech forests that are some of Europe's most iconic heritage, come under increasing pressure by insufficient protection and a lack of ecosystem-based management.

Hence, the new EU Forest Strategy must not only demand the protection of the last remaining primary and old-growth forests, but it must define in clear terms how this protection can be achieved. While the roadmap mentions international commitments of the EU, it does not consider current tools, as e.g. the UNESCO World Heritage and Natura 2000, which already protect old-growth forests, but often require more effective management.

BEECH POWER aims to improve the integrated management of selected component parts of the transnational serial UNESCO World Natural Heritage property 'Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe'. This objective is to be achieved by increasing the involvement of stakeholders and public authorities in management, integrating the component parts in regional sustainable development planning.

Beech forests provide home to a great biodiversity. They are our shared heritage and deserve transnational care. Accordingly, the BEECH POWER project recommends that the EU Forest Strategy will include the following points in line with the aims of the project:

- Utilize UNESCO World Heritage sites and other existing tools and protected area networks to secure the protection of old-growth forests, also in the regional surrounding of respective sites.
- Promote old-growth forest conservation as part of an ecosystem-based sustainable development.
- Emphasize the importance of regulating services of forest ecosystems (e.g. buffering of extreme temperatures) in the context of climate change.
- Prioritize the protection of the microclimate in forests and the preservation and promotion of water-storing structures and soils.
- Emphasize the uniqueness and worth of endemic old-growth beech forests.
- Improve transboundary cooperation in the field of forest protection with trans-sectional and practical tools.
- Promote an ecosystem-based sustainable forest management approach.
- Bear in mind not only the importance of forests for a sustainable economy, but also their benefits for local communities and human wellbeing
- Focus on the education of the young generation by promoting the benefits of forests, especially old-growth forests in the context of the ecosystem services they provide.
- Include stakeholders into processes, which support managers in consensus-based decision-making.