

# Youth Position on the Future of Europe's Forests



## Introduction

This position paper is an outcome of the Youth Consultation Workshops organized in April and May 2024 by the International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA) 9th Ministerial Conference Task Force. The views expressed herein are from members of nine forest-related youth groups across 14 countries, the majority being European. Our primary objective is to propose recommendations on how to foster intergenerational collaboration between the Signatories and Observers of the FOREST EUROPE process and the youth.

As youth representatives in forestry and forest-related sectors and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Agenda 2030, we focus specifically on the Bonn Ministerial Declaration and Decision and their respective Annexes. The position paper aligns with the outgoing FOREST EUROPE chair's work on Green Forest Jobs and Forest Education focusing on youth's contribution to four key topics: 1) forest policy processes, 2) sustainable forest management, 3) the FoRISK facility, and 4) Green Forest Jobs and Forest Education.

## Forest policy processes

There is an increasing interest in including youth at national and sub-national policy-making levels in Europe. In the future, we see this as a standard across European countries.

**Inclusion Showcases:** Initiatives, such as this lasting collaboration between youth and FOREST EUROPE, act as best practice examples for providing youth access to high-level policy processes and opportunities for substantial contributions. For example, position papers and participation in negotiations, are well-established tools for youth contribution and engagement. It is also represented in such initiatives as IFSA's *Open Letter on Gender and Forest Education* and *Youth Call for Action*.

**Continuous Encouragement:** In our vision, the ambition and desire to reflect the legitimate interest of the young generation are perpetually encouraged by strategies for active engagement among different stakeholders in the forest sector policy-making. This can be achieved by utilizing traineeships, capacity building and networking, accessibility to mentorship, creation of youth working groups and student associations, and empowering existing ones. An example of such an initiative is Youth Forest Policy Days, an IFSA - FOREST EUROPE co-organized event to introduce diverse youth groups to the policy development processes.

**Support for Inclusive Policy Processes:** We support § 5 of the Bonn Ministerial Declaration, which highlights FOREST EUROPE as a process for facilitating dialogue. We are committed to continuing our active participation in the dialogue. Our long-term target aligns with § 14 of the Bonn Ministerial Declaration, supporting FOREST EUROPE's role in uniting stakeholder interests and demands. This ties directly to our call for intergenerational dialogue. There is a need to ensure further continuity and progress of these endeavors to support the clear and fair representation of the youth, as part of the policy-making demographic.

## Sustainable Forest Management (SFM)

In our vision of the future state of forests across Europe, we see them as integrated ecosystems that transcend national borders. We envision a mosaic of mixed tree species forests, rich biodiversity, with high structural diversity at multiple spatial and temporal scales, where natural processes and forest dynamics are present, resilient to environmental changes and extreme events, and provide diverse functions (Bonn Ministerial Decision § 7). Their management should be based on the principles of SFM with a focus on close-to-nature forestry and climate-smart forestry approaches, with the integration of innovative technologies. Through our consultation workshop, we see that done by the following measures:

**Forest Resilience:** Key measures identified for resilience were forest integrity, connectivity across borders and landscape types, and incentives, like standardized payments for ecosystem services through certification to move away from monocultures and shifting towards more sustainable practices. Additionally, we advocate for the inclusion of forest genetic diversity conservation, ecosystem-based restoration, re-introduction and protection of keystone species, and a significant network of no-harvesting plots, where applicable, in national forest strategies as committed by the signatories in Bonn Ministerial Decision § 10-12. Supporting § 3 of the Bonn Ministerial Decision regarding forest vitality, we advocate for strategies that foster the biodiversity and self-regulation of forests' microclimates by maintaining partially closed canopy cover and increasing deadwood to mitigate climate change impacts.

**Youth in Integrating Technology and Innovation:** Supporting the commitment made by the Signatories in Bonn Ministerial Declaration § 19, the youth, as the digital generation, skilled in new technologies, can lead the integration of monitoring, reporting, and assessment based on data from for example remote sensing, AI, and LiDAR technology. We endorse the promotion of such innovative tools as a foundation for decision-making processes in sustainable forest management.

**Youth for SFM Communication and Outreach:** Growing up as digital natives, we possess creative expression and innovation, while understanding current culture and trends. The youth can serve as an effective channel for the promotion and communication of the SFM concept (Bonn Ministerial Decision § 12) through awareness campaigns, capacity-building, research, consultation processes, and the inclusion of local communities and indigenous voices. Youth can be a link between science, policy, practice, and civil society by using modern communication tools. This involvement leverages our skills and, crucially, encourages responsibility for maintaining healthy forests.

## FoRISK

We strongly support the establishment of the Pan-European Forest Risk Facility (FoRISK) as mentioned in Bonn Ministerial Decision §14-18 to enhance forest resilience through coordinated, transboundary risk management, especially now, as there is an urgent need to address increasing risks inferred by climate change and extreme weather events in Europe and globally. We would like to be engaged in the following ways:

**Youth Observer Status:** Include a Youth representative as an observer within FoRISK, to ensure youth perspectives are integrated from the initial phase.

**Research and Capacity Building:** Engage Youth in FoRISK's activities for example by offering training, research and thesis opportunities, internships, and mentorship programmes.

**Organizational Memory:** We recommend that FoRISK establish a well-organized system for documenting and storing knowledge for a generational changeover. This system should not only facilitate the exchange of information among countries and stakeholders in the present but also ensure that valuable knowledge is accessible for future generations.

## Green Forest Jobs and Forest Education

We believe that forest education and Green Forest Jobs are interconnected. § 18 of the Bonn Ministerial Declaration echoes our vision to ease the transition from studying to the job market. It enables forest professionals to continually update their knowledge and skills, through lifelong learning.

**Knowledge Sharing and Curriculum Development:** Aligned with § 18 of the Bonn Ministerial Declaration, we aim to promote Green Forest Jobs and Forest Education by engaging with local groups and leveraging youth-friendly platforms to educate and inspire more young people. We also suggest including universities and other relevant stakeholders in the plans for the mobilization of resources and promotion of knowledge, with the help of thematic workshops and social media. For this, we seek support from professionals in higher education to update curricula for better education and alignment on Green Forest Jobs.

**Addressing the Gaps:** With reference to § 19 of the Bonn Ministerial Decision, IFSA has been working on the identification of gaps in competencies and technical skills, to enhance forestry students' formal education. Here we would emphasize the relevance of generic skills, and capacity development in addressing the gaps. IFSA's online platform called TreE-Learning is focused on addressing these gaps and plans for its future expansion are underway. The Bonn Ministerial Decision suggests increasing dialogue and we look forward to participating and contributing to it.

**Two-way Lifelong Learning:** Learning can be a two-way process, as demonstrated by IFSA's mentorship efforts, which is why we will keep investing in it. We support improved dialogue across groups in the forest sector, especially youth, as it enriches learning and amplifies our voices and opinions to be brought to the mainstream. This aligns with § 21 of the Bonn Ministerial Decision, which emphasizes lifelong learning through dialogue and knowledge transfer, fostering a more holistic understanding of the sector.

## Conclusions and summary

Based on the examination of the Bonn Ministerial Documents and feedback procedure, we conclude that the said Documents are **well-aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030**. They reflect the **support of youth inclusion** in political dialogues, **recognition of environmental challenges**, and empowerment of **mechanisms for adaptation and mitigation**. Simultaneously, we recognize the significant **potential for youth contributions** to these efforts. That is emphasized by the effectiveness of the best practices on **knowledge sharing**, youth inclusion, and a **two-way learning** process, by youth proclivity for **technologies and innovations** integration, and **research** interest. We express our **readiness to actively participate** in achieving the common goal of resilient forest ecosystems for the future.

## Participating Organizations

Facilitated by FOREST EUROPE

