

Joint recommendation

of FTP and the forest-based sector on the next EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme (FP9)

The next EU Research & Innovation Framework Programme (FP9) should be an ambitious framework programme built on Horizon 2020's achievements but taking measures to significantly increase the impact visible to European citizens. Despite many efforts, the full strategic potential of having one European Research & Innovation Framework Programme, remains to be achieved.

We strongly believe that to safeguard sustainable growth and jobs in Europe, both the FP9 and the organisation of its future administration, should be designed so that the recommendations hereby provided are very much addressed. We will continue to cooperate with the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Member States in the process to define and implement an ambitious FP9.

About FTP

The Forest-based Sector Technology Platform (FTP) is the recognised European Technology Platform for the forest-based sector. In this capacity it represents, directly or indirectly, 16 million forest-owners, 3 million workers and almost 400 000 large, small and medium-sized enterprises on issues related to research and innovation. For more than a decade, FTPs stakeholders have gathered much practical experience from hundreds of EU-projects. This accumulated experience has been carefully collected and analysed by FTP as well as the impact of the completed projects on the forest-based sector.

Recommendations

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Section A: Purpose and structure of FP9

Recommendation 1: Focus on relevance to the European citizens

The impact delivered to the European citizen must be strengthened. We advise in particular to seek a stronger impact on jobs and growth and to support industries with a European production base.

Recommendation 2: Ensure a balanced three-pillar approach

Fundamental research, applied research, demonstration activities and innovation actions are different aspects of the research and innovation value-chain. All those aspects need to be covered for maximum added-value to society. We believe in maintaining the three pillar approach (i.e. Excellent Science, Industrial Leadership, and Societal Challenges) of Horizon 2020 in FP9 and that each one of those pillars should have a fairly equal budget.

Recommendation 3: Encourage participation of business and industry

The participation of SMEs as well as larger companies must be further promoted to ensure a successful and rapid exploitation of results. Most important to increase industry's participation is a reasonable success rate, call topics focusing on European strengths and specificities and a balance between "new" and "traditional" technologies and industry sectors. The "simplification" process has been very successful in making it easier for industry to participate and we would encourage the process to continue.

In order to reduce the over-subscription, lower the entry threshold for first-time applicants and allow for timely launched "follow up projects", we suggest that the same two-stage approach which is used in the existing SME Instrument (which offers seamless business innovation support, from feasibility assessment to commercialisation) is also used for other Calls and Instruments.

Recommendation 4: Focus on impact and select one objective per Call Topic

Resist the political temptation to stack several objectives onto one Call Topic or Funding Instrument. To give a fair chance to all stakeholders and increase transparency and impact, the principle of one Call - one clearly stated objective should apply. The expected impact described in a Call Topic should be focused on this one objective to allow the formation of relevant proposals and partnerships. To address several objectives, different Calls Topics can be launched. This will also help to better define the Call Topics, making them "sharper" and thus reducing oversubscription.

Section B: Measuring and increasing the impact of activities

Recommendation 5: Use recognized ETPs and relevant stakeholder networks to increase impact and outreach

Give increased recognition to established and well-organised, open and democratic stakeholder communities serving the EU programme with new priorities. European Technology Platforms (ETPs) and other organised networks connect stakeholders at the European-, National and regional level under one umbrella. The ETPs help with prioritisation, dissemination and impact assessment. ETPs are to be considered tools for their respective sector AND the Commission in defining R&D needs and priorities, developing strategic research agenda's and more. In this context they serve also in evaluating the impact of the Framework Programme.

Recommendation 6: Low success rates cost the European society billions of Euros

The success rates in some H2020 Calls for Proposals have been so low that more resources are actually put into preparing proposals than to executing the selected projects. This deters industry (SMEs as well as large companies) from joining in proposal partnerships since a very low success rate adds a new element of uncertainty in the research and demonstration stages preceding major investment decisions, i.e. exactly at the point in time when innovation support is needed the most. With more focused calls/topics the number of proposals could be reduced.

Recommendation 7: Ensure funded projects have easy access to European research infrastructure

We see a need to address the currently weak links between European research infrastructure and European projects. Companies and researchers should have easier access to European research infrastructure using funding from their EU-projects. This could be accomplished by increased funding for research infrastructure, including smaller facilities and by making it as simple as possible for partnerships (including partners from third countries) to utilise European research infrastructure.

Section C: Preparation of Calls for Proposals and Work Programmes

Recommendation 8: Make preparation of the Work Programmes more transparent to stakeholders

The actual impact of the Framework Programme depends on realistic yet ambitious, well defined and timely Call Topics assigned an adequate budget. The process of preparing the FP Work Programmes requires qualified input of relevant stakeholders.

However, the preparation of the Work Programmes has grown to a tremendously complicated and heterogeneous process with input collected from public consultations, Strategic Research Agendas of ETPs and PPPs, conclusions from workshops, Member States positions as well as inter-service consultations.

The correlation between stakeholders' input and the content of the final Work Programmes has become less and less obvious. The trend towards less transparent, less predictable and more complicated procedures must be reversed.

We recommend making a serious effort to improve traceability and transparency, from the collection of stakeholders input to the final Call texts, in the Work Programmes.

Recommendation 9: Maintain relevant know-how within the Commission administration

In order to reduce administrative costs, the Commission staff numbers are being reduced, in particular so in DG RTD. Key stages in the implementation of the FP budget, such as the proposal evaluation process and project follow-ups, have largely been externalised to Executive Agencies. The fact that the administration of the Horizon2020 budget is now subordinate to policy-related work in the EC staff work description is detrimental to the quality of the FP implementation.

This situation should be addressed in FP9. The EC staff responsible for FP9 should have relevant experience in the field their position address and it should be ensured that DG RTD stays well connected to the practical implementation of the Framework Programme. The EC should also strive towards providing clear answers to questions of a legal and financial nature.

Section D: Funding Instruments

Recommendation 10: Continue the use of the ERA-NET Cofund Instrument

The ERA-Net family of instruments have been very efficient and appreciated by our stakeholders. We recommend that the ERA-Net instrument is retained in FP9.

Recommendation 11: Do not replace grants with loans and risk-financing instruments

Do not replace grants with loans and risk-financing instruments. The role of ERDF and the Structural Funds can however be complementary to the grants of the FP. However, more support and education is needed to better improve this complementarity.

Recommendation 12: Be restrictive with the launch of new funding instruments

Many different funding instruments have been engineered under the EU Framework Programmes. COST actions, Integrated Projects, SME actions, ERA-Nets, Joint Programming Initiatives, Innovation Deals etc. It might be tempting to invent new instruments with the purpose to optimise and modernise the FP. However, new Instruments also create complications and require a learning curve for the Commission and the FP stakeholders. We would like to caution against launching new Instruments as long as an existing Instrument can fill the intended purpose.

Recommendation 13: Maintain small-scale projects (less than €5 million)

We see a trend towards increasing the minimum grant allocated to a proposal in order to reduce the number of projects that have to be administrated by the EC and Executive Agencies. This is counter-productive in the longer term. Increasing the minimum grant agreement threshold might motivate applicants to overestimate budget items in order to be eligible. It also discourages applicants with well-defined but lower budget requests. Meanwhile, the magnitude of larger projects requires very experienced coordination, carries an increased financial risk and more internal administration. This prevents smaller organisations to take the lead or act as coordinators.

Section E. Thematic Priorities - Supporting the circular bioeconomy and raw materials

Recommendation 14: Support sustainable biomass mobilization in a coherent way

Many European regions optimise forestry with the aim of nature conservation, providing ecosystem services, soil protection and water sequestration. However, FTP believes that, bearing in mind the full range of demand and production constraints, harvesting possibilities in Europe can be significantly increased until 2030, enabling the forest owners to manage their forests more efficiently and sustainably.

For instance, a 30% increase of harvesting of forest biomass would produce an added value of at least 75 billion Euros in the forest-based value-chain. However, reaching this target by 2030 would require more education about Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) as well as a stronger support for social and technological innovation activities. It is important to support the diversification of traditional farm and forest enterprises to introduce non-traditional sources of income, thus improving the quality of life of the rural people.

Recommendation 15: Continue the Bio-based Industries Joint Undertaking (BBI)

The Bio-based Industries Joint Undertaking (BBI JU) has mobilised the European biobased process industries and it creates an excellent return for the EU tax payers. The programme is guided by strong participation from bio-based industry members and the success rate for BBI JU Calls is better compared to other H2020 Calls. We recommend that the Joint Undertaking receives continued support post 2020.

Recommendation 16: Support the substitution of fossil-based and energy-intensive materials

The focus should be on current and future major markets so that projects can achieve success in a manageable period. One of the most important markets for renewable raw material – especially wood – is the building sector in Europe which is responsible for around 30% of the EU's CO₂ emissions. It is also important to support the emergence of new business models promoting a better utilisation of renewable resources.

Recommendation 17: Support mainstreamed approaches of climate change adaptation and mitigation to forestry

The forest-based sector contributes to climate change mitigation in several ways. Carbon is sequestered and stored in ecosystems and wood products and there is a substantial positive effect achieved by substituting energy-intensive materials and providing green energy. Forestry in Europe has in recent decades built up a significant carbon sink, but there are indications of decreasing sink strength. Sustaining and improving the long-term carbon sink, and at the same time also the provision of all the other services to society by Europe's forests, requires coupled strategies in forest management for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. Such strategies have to focus on higher resilience of forests to climate change and at the same time on improving forest growth to enable an increased carbon sink and higher biomass availability to serve the bioeconomy.

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