

OVERVIEW OF THE STATUS AND PROTECTION OF FOREST RESOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

Forests are one of Lithuania's most important natural resources, performing significant ecological, economic and social functions. They contribute to mitigating climate change, protect biodiversity, soil and water resources, provide the public with timber and other forest products, facilitate recreation and improve the quality of the living environment.

Forests are home to many protected plant and animal species and natural habitats, so their protection is vital for preserving biodiversity. To this end, the European Union has established the Natura 2000 ecological network, which brings together areas of European importance for protected species and natural habitats.

The National Progress Plan for 2021–2030 sets out a target to increase Lithuania's forest cover to 35 percent by 2030, while a 2024 Seimas resolution on forest policy agreed to increase forest cover to 40 percent by 2050. The European Union's Forest Strategy for 2030 and the Biodiversity Strategy also recognise the important role of forests in mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources.

Issues relating to the use, protection and management of forests have remained the subject of active debate in recent years. In order to find balanced solutions that safeguard environmental, economic and public interests, the process of developing a National Agreement on Forests was initiated for the period 2021–2024. The Ministry of Environment is currently leading the preparation of a National Strategic Document for the Forest Sector up to 2050, which aims to set out long-term forest policy directions. Since 2024, the process of amending the Law on Forestry has been underway, but the legislative

amendments have not yet been adopted. As a result, the implementation of some of the planned changes to forestry policy has been postponed, and important issues relating to the use, protection and management of forests remain unresolved.

In 2022, the National Audit Office carried out an audit entitled “Protection of Lithuanian Forest Resources” and made recommendations on increasing forest cover, including all natural forests in the State Forest Cadastre and classifying them into forest groups, identifying the causes of large-scale forest damage, assessing the risk of the spread of diseases and pests, establishing an adequate Natura 2000 network, and monitoring the forest habitats within it. However, no significant changes have been achieved in these areas to date.

The aim of this overview is to examine trends in the status and protection of Lithuanian forests, relating to changes in forest cover, the protection of biodiversity and habitats, the economic and environmental significance of forests, and the accuracy of data.

SUMMARY

Issues relating to the use, protection and management of Lithuanian forests remain the subject of lively debate. In order to reach balanced solutions, the EU Forest Strategy for 2030 and the EU Biodiversity Strategy are of particular importance, as they emphasise the role of forests in mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. Urgent and balanced legislative and policy decisions are therefore essential – including the adoption of the National Strategic Document for the Forestry Sector up to 2050 and amendments to the Law on Forestry – in order to implement the objectives of the National Agreement on Forests and ensure a long-term balance between ecological, economic and social functions.

The main findings of the overview are set out below, organised by individual sections:

- ✓ **The rate of forest cover increase is insufficient to achieve the set targets.** Forests play a vital role in combating and adapting to climate change. The 2021–2030 National Progress Plan set out to achieve a forest cover level of 34 percent by 2025 and 35 percent by 2030. However, in 2025, forest cover stood at only 33.91 percent, and in 2023, Lithuania’s forest cover (33.8 percent) was significantly lower than the EU average (39 percent) and lagged considerably behind the Nordic and Baltic countries. At this rate, the 35 percent target would only be reached around 2047 – almost two decades later than planned.
- ✓ **There is no clear ambition to develop forests of varying ages and with a more complex structure.** The 2030 EU Forest Strategy notes that climate change has a particularly negative impact on monospecific and even-aged stands, while mixed and multi-aged forests are more resilient. Monospecific stands predominate in Lithuania: 73–74 percent of forests consist of pine, spruce and birch stands, and in around 55 percent of stands, trees of a single species are strongly dominant (one species accounts for more than 75 percent of the volume). Between 2014 and 2023, the level of monospecificity did not decrease significantly, and in some stands it even increased. At European level, forests containing two or more species cover almost 70 percent of the total area, whereas in Lithuania there are no clear trends towards increased species and age diversity.

- ✓ **The area of strictly protected forests should be increased; the Natura 2000 network remains incomplete; and the state of protection of forest habitats is not improving.** The Natura 2000 network remains inadequate (with a shortfall of around 15,000 ha of forest habitats), while the conservation status of most forest habitats remains unfavourable and has even deteriorated. By 2030, the EU Biodiversity Strategy aims to protect at least 30 percent of the EU's land area through effective management measures, of which 10 percent should be under strict legal protection, including forest ecosystems, with particular emphasis on the protection of primeval and old-growth forests. In Lithuania, the area of protected (Group I) forests accounts for just 1.25 percent (a figure that has remained virtually unchanged over the past decade), meaning it would need to be almost doubled (to approximately 68,000 ha). This falls far short of the EU strategy's targets.
- ✓ **The increasing proportion of commercial forests may have a negative impact on the balance of economic, ecological and social functions.** The forestry sector remains important to the economy (3.63 percent of GDP and 6.7 percent of exports), while the proportion of commercial (Group IV) forests has risen from 71.4 percent to 75 percent over the last two decades. However, intensifying forestry practices are not contributing to improved biodiversity. The report on the implementation of the Habitats Directive (covering the period 2019–2024), submitted to the European Commission in 2025, states that the conservation status of most forest habitats in Lithuania remains unfavourable, with only a small proportion assessed as favourable. This poses a serious threat to the balance of all forest functions (ecological, economic and social).
- ✓ **Shortcomings in inventorying and the lack of up-to-date data may create conditions for abuse and the adoption of inappropriate decisions.** Rapidly developing geoinformation technologies, remote sensing and automated analysis solutions provide excellent opportunities for real-time forest monitoring and smart management; however, these opportunities are not being utilised sufficiently in Lithuania. As a result, significant shortcomings in accounting persist (including delays in implementing the 2018 recommendation on a clear procedure for accounting for forest land), statistics are distorted, and conditions for abuse are created.

The findings of this overview indicate that the Lithuanian forestry sector requires systematic, long-term and coordinated changes. Taking into account the delay in implementing some of the recommendations from the National Audit Office's 2022 audit "Protection of Lithuania's Forest Resources", and the challenges identified in this overview, the National Audit Office plans to launch an audit in 2026 entitled "Protection of Biodiversity and Enhancing the Resilience of Forests to Climate Change".