Euroopan unionin metsästrategia
Gemenskapsstrategi för skogssektorn

Presidente. - Segue-se na ordem do dia o relatório (A4-0414/96) do deputado Thomas, em nome da Comissão da Agricultura e do Desenvolvimento Rural, sobre a estratégia florestal da União Europeia.

Thomas (PSE), rapporteur. - Mr President, I have great pleasure in presenting today my report on behalf of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development on the European Union’s forestry strategy.

I would first like to point out the procedural significance of this report which constitutes an important historical step for the European Parliament. Article 138b of the Treaty on European Union gives Parliament the right to initiate legislation. Although this article has indeed been used before for specific measures, this is the first occasion on which it is being used to call for legislation across the entire sector, which is of considerable importance in all Member States and has implications which touch on the employment, economic prospects and future of millions of citizens of the Union. I am proud to be associated with this step and I shall be very interested to hear from the Commissioner, who is here today, whether the Commission intends to respond positively to this request by Parliament.

Forestry is extremely important in the European Union although, of course, its importance varies in different Member States. When I was in Finland recently, a forest owner said to me that, for Finland, the forestry industry was as important as the automobile industry is in Germany.

The resolution which the Committee on Agriculture voted for unanimously covers the following points: it stresses the importance of the forestry sector as a source of employment and wealth and points out that the commercial utilization of forests should be a priority. However, one has to recognize the diversity of European forests; their multi-functional nature and the need for ecological, economic and social sustainability. This means that forestry strategy must be based on the principle of subsidiarity. We have to aim for a clear definition of national policies, setting objectives at national and international level and establishing a link between forest strategy and other policies such as environmental and rural policy. Quite clearly the European Union and its Member States must respect the resolutions approved under the Rio Declaration and the Helsinki Agreement.

The resolution concentrates on three different aspects: the protection of forests, their utilization and development, and their extension. As far as protection is concerned, I would like to highlight one important point: the protection of forests against fire. Every year approximately half-a-million hectares of forest are destroyed by fire. This is a massive waste of resources which should be tackled by a coordinated programme at Member State, regional and forest-owner level and by action by the European Union. We need to encourage the utilization of forests not just as a source of timber, but for their environmental and recreational values. These are not mutually exclusive areas of concern. There is no reason why the use of timber should not be encouraged, particularly through a coherent quality policy, while at the same time, forests should become an even more valuable resource as a means of recreation for our citizens and because of their environmental value.

We also need to extend and increase forest resources, respecting biodiversity and the traditional landscape and helping to prevent erosion and desertification. In some parts of the EU it makes sense to promote the sustainable management of agri-forestry systems.

There is also specific action we should take to improve the European forestry inventory, encourage research in forest eco-systems, develop education and training and promote the development of economic and social interests of forests.

The committee is also making proposals to extend the role of the Permanent Forestry Committee so that it becomes the chief instrument in the coordination of forestry matters and, at international level, to coordinate forestry-related concepts more effectively so that they are taken into account in the Union’s general trade policies.

The Commission should submit an effective action plan to combat ecological and social dumping in relation to imports of timber. Also, the Commission and the Member States should continue to work actively towards an international convention on the protection and sustainability of forest management.

There is also the difficult question of how to agree an international certification system concerning the sustainable management of forests. Certification should meet the objectives of enhancing - economically, socially and ecologically - the sustainable use of forests.

I hope that I have covered the main aspects of the committee’s proposals. The committee voted for this report unanimously and I hope that it will receive a large measure of support in Parliament in order to ensure that our voice is heard loud and clear in the Commission. I would like to hear whether the Com-
missioner will be making a proposal along the lines suggested.

With regard to the amendments which have been tabled, I would like to remind Members that my priority is to see that a large measure of consensus which was achieved in the Agricultural Committee is preserved. I am not prepared to accept amendments which upset this balance. I am, however, accepting some ideas from Members which are useful additions. I emphasize that - *useful* additions.