

Working Forests: How Europe's Paper And Paper Board Industries Help Keep Forests Growing

European forests are still expanding and responsibly produced paper is part of the solution.

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Across Europe, forests are part of everyday life. They store carbon, host wildlife, protect soils and water, provide jobs and materials, and offer places to walk, work and relax. They also supply the wood fibre that makes our paper and paper-based packaging.

Contrary to popular belief, Europe's forests are not disappearing because of paper. The latest figures from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization show that forest area in Europe is still increasing. The real story is about how well-managed "working forests" can supply wood and paper while staying healthy and expanding over time.^{1,2}

1. Europe's Forests: Bigger, Not Disappearing

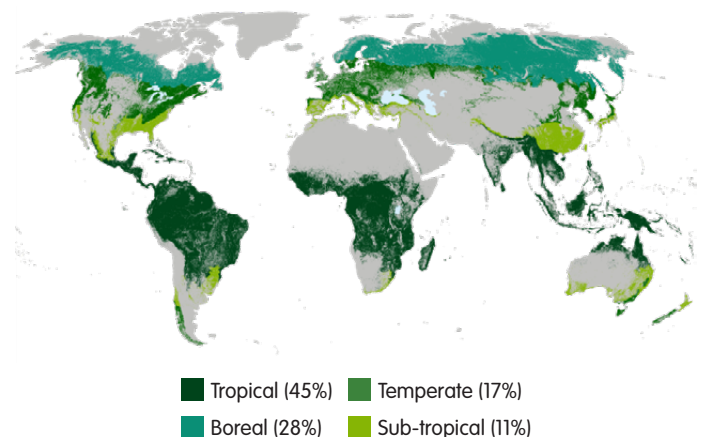
The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's latest Global Forest Resources Assessment (GFRA 2025) confirms that forests across Europe remain extensive and continue to expand. For the wider European region, GFRA 2025 shows that forests still cover more than one-third of the land area and continue to act as a major carbon sink.^{1,2}

For the 30-country 'Two Sides Europe' group (EU-27 plus the United Kingdom, Norway and Switzerland), Two Sides' analysis of GFRA 2025 country data indicates that forest area increased by around 3.24 million hectares between 2015 and 2025. That is roughly 324,000 hectares per year, or about 888 hectares per day – equivalent to around 1,250 full-size football pitches of net forest growth every day over this 10-year period.³

Globally, GFRA 2025 estimates that forests cover about 4.1 billion hectares – roughly 32% of the world's land area – but notes that some world regions still experience net forest loss, mainly where forests are converted to agriculture or other land uses.² That makes Europe's continuing forest growth, alongside active use of wood, paper and paper packaging, an important and positive story.

Area is only part of the picture. According to the same GFRA 2025 dataset used in this analysis, growing stock in the 30-country Two Sides Europe group increased from about 28.9 billion m³ in 2015 to 30.19 billion m³ in 2025, while total carbon stock increased from 31.0 to 31.82 gigatonnes. Europe's forests are therefore not only covering more land; they are also holding more wood and carbon.³

Total World Forest Area



2. What Really Threatens Forests?

When people think about pressures on forests, they often picture logging trucks and stacks of timber. In reality, GFRA 2025 and other global assessments show that the main driver of deforestation is the conversion of forest to other land uses – especially large-scale agriculture, infrastructure and urban expansion – rather than the production of paper itself.²

+44 (0)1327 262920

@TwoSidesUK

www.twosides.info

@TwoSidesUK

enquiries@twosides.info

/company/TwoSidesUK

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In Europe, most forests are managed under legal frameworks and long-term plans. The key challenge is not whether forests are being harvested, but how they are managed, how quickly they regenerate, and whether forest land is kept as forest rather than being converted to other uses.

None of this means Europe's forests are free from risk. Climate change, drought, storms, pests and more frequent wildfires are putting forests under increasing stress, and GFRA 2025 highlights the growing impact of climate-related disturbances on forest health and carbon sinks.²

3. How Paper Fits Into Europe's "Working Forests"

Paper is often blamed for forest loss, but in Europe it is firmly part of a managed forest cycle. Wood for paper and board comes mainly from production forests – sometimes called "working forests" – where trees are planted, grown and harvested, then regenerated through natural regrowth or replanting.

In these forests, the most valuable parts of the tree go to long-lived products such as beams, panels and furniture. The paper industry uses the rest: smaller-diameter logs (pulpwood), thinnings that improve forest health, and residues from sawmills such as chips and sawdust. On top of this, a large share of the fibre used in European paper and paper packaging now comes from paper and fibre-based packaging that has already been used and collected for recycling. The current recycling rate for paper is 75% and paper-based packaging is even higher at 87%.^{4,5}

According to the Confederation of European Paper Industries (Cepi), a large majority of the wood and pulp used by the European pulp and paper industry comes from forests that are independently certified as sustainably managed.⁶ Other industry sources note that most of the wood fibres used in European paper and paper-based packaging originate from European woodlands, much of it from certified forests.⁷

It's true that Europe imports some market pulp from outside the region, including Latin America, particularly for certain grades and mills. But the overall fibre source remains overwhelmingly regional. According to Cepi's latest statistics, around 90% of the pulpwood used by the European pulp and paper industry is sourced within Europe, and approximately 89% of wood consumed by Cepi mills is of domestic origin. Imported market pulp represents a relatively small share of total fibre input, with Latin America accounting for around 5-6% of market pulp imports into Cepi countries. Put simply, imported pulp matters in some supply chains but the European paper industry is not dependent on South America for the majority of its fibre.⁷

4. Using The Whole Tree: From Offcuts To Recycled Paper

A simple way to picture this is to follow a harvested tree from the forest to the final products:

- The straight, high-quality sections of the trunk are sawn into timber for construction, joinery and other long-lived uses.
- Smaller-diameter logs and tops, which are not suitable for structural timber, become pulpwood for paper and board.
- Sawmill residues – chips, bark, edgings and trimmings – are valuable raw materials for pulp, wood panels and bioenergy.
- Used paper and board are collected, sorted and recycled several times, extending the life of the original forest fibre.

By using lower-grade wood and residues that would otherwise have limited value, and by recycling fibres again and again, the paper value chain helps ensure that as much as possible of each harvested tree is put to good use.

5. Managed Forests, Climate Risks And Wildfire

Climate change is making life harder for Europe's forests. Longer dry spells, heatwaves, storms and new pest outbreaks are already affecting forest health in many regions, while wildfire seasons have become longer and more intense, especially in southern Europe.²

In well-managed production forests, foresters use tools such as thinning, species selection, firebreaks and access tracks to reduce fuel loads and improve resilience. When markets exist for all parts of the tree – from high-quality timber to pulpwood and residues – there is also more income available to invest in prevention, monitoring and restoration.



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Firebreak running through a sustainably managed production forest.

Active management cannot eliminate risks, but it can help forests cope better with a changing climate. Sustainable use and protection go hand in hand: forest products such as timber and paper can support investment in forest health, provided they come from well-managed, certified sources.^{6,7}

What's more, working/certified forests store more carbon than historical forests that are not managed properly or those containing older trees. Young trees grow more quickly than older trees and store more carbon. Once these trees are fully grown, they can then be harvested and new trees planted again in their place continuing the loop of increased carbon intake.

6. What Responsible Paper And Paper-Based Packaging Production Looks Like

In Europe, responsible paper production rests on three main pillars:

I. Sustainably managed and certified forests.

Forest certification schemes such as FSC and PEFC set standards for biodiversity, regeneration, workers' rights and community consultation. Europe has some of the highest levels of forest certification in the world, and the paper industry is a major user of certified wood and pulp.^{6,9,10}

II. High recycling rates and circular use of fibre.

Europe is a world leader in paper recycling. The European paper value chain has maintained recycling rates around 70–80% in recent years, with a current paper recycling rate of 75% and 87% for paper-based packaging. Paper is recycled more than any other packaging material in the EU.^{4,5}

III. Efficient use of resources and low waste.

Modern pulp and paper mills use energy-efficient technologies and increasingly rely on renewable bioenergy derived from process residues. By using the whole tree and closing loops wherever possible, the industry reduces waste and supports a more circular bio-economy.^{6,7}

7. What This Means For Brands, Printers, Packaging Producers And Consumers

The message is clear: choosing paper and paper-based packaging from responsibly managed forests supports forest continuity. When forest owners earn income from certified wood and paper markets, they are more likely to keep land under forest, invest in regeneration and maintain long-term management plans.^{4,5,10}

Look for clear information from suppliers: forest certification logos like as FSC and PEFC, responsible sourcing policies, and transparent statements on recycled content and chain-of-custody. These tools help ensure that the paper you use is part of a positive forest story, not a negative one.^{9,10,11}

Finally, remember that recycling is only part of the picture. Paper fibres cannot be recycled indefinitely; some fresh fibre from sustainably managed forests is always needed to keep the cycle going. A mix of recycled fibre and certified virgin fibre is the most resilient model for a healthy, circular paper system.^{5,8,11}

Sources

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