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The original document in Finnish:

<https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/JulkaisuMetatieto/Documents/EDK-2024-AK-33184.pdf>

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Parliament of Finland's Environment Committee
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Reference: Environment Committee expert opinion request, Friday 13 September 2024 at 9.30 a.m.
(For the Committee, local meeting in room E 427, hearing remote hearing) Theme:
Protection criteria for old-growth forests

Subject matter: The Environment Committee would like the Finnish Environment Institute to provide a progress report on the preparation of the protection criteria for old-growth forests. (There is no ID or background material. The Committee would like to hear about this on its own initiative.)

The Finnish Environment Institute's statement for the Environment Committee's expert consultation on the protection criteria for old-growth forests on 13 September 2024

How do primary and old-growth forests differ?

The EU Biodiversity Strategy "Bringing nature back into our lives" (COM/2020/380) states that all remaining (1) primary forests and (2) old-growth forests must be strictly protected in EU Member States (figure 1). The goal has been in effect since the adoption of the EU's biodiversity strategy (May 2020). The strategy also requires the protection of logged sites after its entry into force. The overall goal of the strategy is to halt biodiversity loss and ensure the preservation of biodiversity for future generations. The Finnish Government is committed to the goals of the strategy.



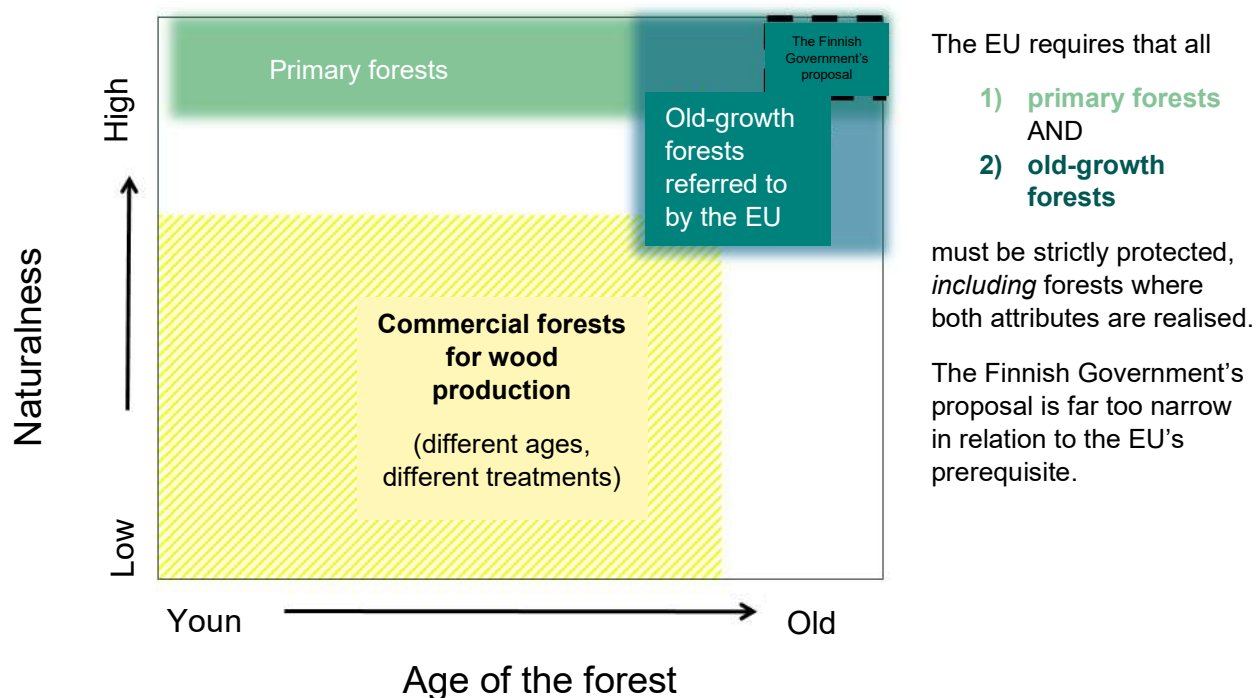


Figure 1. The concepts of primary forest (green colour) and old-growth forest (blue colour) and their relationship to the Finnish Government's proposal on the criteria for old-growth forests (area delimited by a black dashed line). The majority of Finnish forests are used for wood production (yellow colour). Note! The sizes of the different coloured boxes are indicative (not based on surface area data). Adapted from publication Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024.

In accordance with the EU Commission's guidelines, researchers from the Finnish Environment Institute and the Natural Resources Institute Finland prepared a review frame for the national definition of old-growth forests ([publication Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024](#)) (section (2) above). Old-growth forest also includes primary old-growth forests (as part of section (1) above), and the definition of primary forests was not examined in more detail in the report. Primary forests are subject to the FAO's definition, which also includes young primary developmental stages.

Definition of old-growth forests

Three main indicators in particular, which have been identified in the EU Commission's guidelines, were used in defining old-growth forests. These indicators are: natural tree species, large amounts and proportions of deadwood, and old and large trees. The work presented a

review frame where old-growth forests can be placed. Research results on the age of primary old-growth forests and the amount of deadwood were used as a scientific reference. The practical benchmark was formed by criteria already in use in Finland, such as the inventory guidelines of the protection programme for old-growth forests and the Habitats Directive's "boreal primary forests" inventory guidelines, which were also found to be well suited to identifying old-growth forests referred to by the EU Commission (Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024).

The Finnish Environment Institute emphasises that the proposal prepared by the Finnish Government only covers approximately 75% of primary old-growth forests and completely excludes from the definition the other old-growth forests referred to by the EU for which the criteria had to be developed (figure 1). If primary old-growth forests are to be protected by 90%, the threshold values for both the age and deadwood criteria must be lowered according to the Finnish Government's proposal. The Deforestation Regulation and the Renewable Energy Directive also fully prohibit the logging of primary forests. In addition, the Renewable Energy Directive also requires old-growth forests to be excluded from forest management.

The threshold values presented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment and their usability in examining old-growth forests

Based on the report (SY 2/2024), the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry presented two different alternative definitions of old-growth forests to the Government (Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, background memo, 11 March 2024). Of these, the Government chose the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's proposal almost as it is, with the emphasis on the oldest and most primary forests. However, there are only a small amount of old-growth forests left in Finland, even if we look at the looser criteria proposed by the Ministry of the Environment, which also include some of the other old-growth forests referred to by the EU in addition to primary old-growth forests. According to the report (Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024), there are only approximately 63,000 hectares of old-growth forests corresponding to the Ministry of Environment's proposal on wood production forest land, of which more than half are on the state-owned lands of Northern Finland. According to the report, 13,000 hectares of the old-growth forests used for wood production on state-owned lands are located in Northern Lapland in the Sapmí homeland.

Thus, the proposal chosen by the Government covers a moderate proportion (1) of primary old-growth forests, but not all of them. Other old-growth forests referred to by the EU Commission (2) are completely excluded from the criteria presented. The Finnish Environment Institute points out that the selected threshold values will not get us close to the EU's biodiversity strategy goal of protecting all primary and old-growth forests in the EU area by 2030. The requirement of the criteria presented by the Finnish Government for the amount of deadwood is so high that it is not achieved in a large proportion of old-growth forests that have already been protected.

The threshold values proposed by the Ministry of the Environment (11 March 2024) are more useful if the remaining old-growth forests referred to by the EU Commission are to be protected. They better correspond to the science-based indicator values referred to by the EU



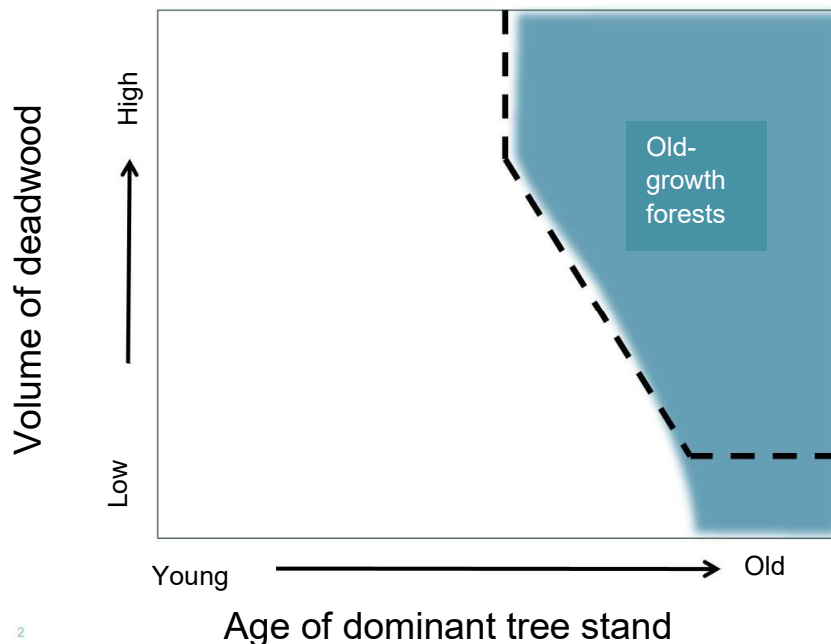
Commission. In this case, too, it should be taken into account that although age assessment works in determining old-growth forests on poorly productive forest land and peatland, it is not possible to set volume targets for deadwood as high as in high-yielding mineral soil heath forests. Deadwood can only be scarcely available naturally in these areas. Forests on peatlands – such as spruce swamps and pine swamps – are also significant carbon storages, and old-growth forests on peatlands that have a similar natural status in terms of trees and water management (inherently less deadwood) should be strictly protected.

The Finnish Environment Institute emphasises that the criteria proposed by the Finnish Government are not in line with scientific data. The proposed definition tailored to primary old-growth forests, which is intended to be applied to all old-growth forests, is a purposeful distortion of scientific data. The goal of the Finnish Government's proposal is apparently to preserve as much of the old-growth forests as possible within the scope of wood production, which is contrary to Finland's international nature conservation commitments. However, it should be taken into account that the strict protection of forests that are valuable from the perspective of nature conservation is also a goal for forest sector operators when companies strive for the sustainable production and processing of wood as a raw material.

Trade-off analysis and use of supplementary indicators

The publication (Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024) did not utilise the supplementary indicators of the EU guidelines, which include, for example, naturalness, natural regeneration and endangered and characteristic indicator species of old-growth forests. These supplementary indicators should also be examined on a case-by-case basis when selecting protected sites if the age of the forest and/or the amount of deadwood are close to the possible threshold values examined in the publication. The Finnish Environment Institute points out that the strict application of the main criteria leads to a situation where forests with endangered old-growth forest species are logged. This promotes biodiversity loss and the endangerment of forest species.

The interpretation and threshold values of the criteria for old-growth forests must include case-specific flexibility, depending on what kind of whole the site forms in relation to the different indicators. The EU Commission also requires flexibility in the application of the criteria. For example, if the amount of deadwood meets the specified threshold values, but the average age of the main tree population is below them (or vice versa), the sites can be considered to be included in the scope of the review (figure 2). This trade-off analysis is presented in the report (Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024) and also mentioned in the memo of the Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, but it is not included in the Finnish Government's proposal, which is a key shortcoming. The trade-off analysis should include supplementary indicators (such as the presence of endangered old-growth forest species) and the landscape level (the proximity of a naturally valuable forest area can improve the quality factors of the surrounding forest in the relatively short term), on the basis of which the requirement level of the main indicators (age and amount of deadwood) could be lowered.



The EU requires flexibility in the application of the criteria for old-growth forests. Here, it is described by using the trade-off of the criteria for age and the amount of deadwood.

If there is a lot of deadwood, the age requirement is lower.

If the main tree population is considerably old, the requirement for the amount of deadwood is lower.

Figure 2. The principle of the trade-off analysis when defining old-growth forests based on the amount of deadwood and the age of the main tree population. The protection value of the objects within the area delimited by a dashed line is examined in more detail. Note! The trade-off analysis presented in the figure is in principle and is not based on surface area data. Adapted from publication Finnish Environment Institute 2/2024.

Surface area

The minimum surface areas of individual forest sites proposed by the Government are not scientifically justified and can be considered to be contrary to the European Commission's mandate. The patches of old-growth forest are heavily fragmented, which means that the prerequisite that the cores of old-growth forests should be at least 4 ha in Southern Finland and 8 ha in Northern Finland becomes a strongly guiding factor in the selection of sites and excludes forests valuable to biodiversity from protection. Both the Convention on Biological Diversity and FAO use a minimum pattern size of 0.5 hectares in forests, which should also be used as a minimum surface area in this context. In accordance with the EU's guidelines, limiting wider protection wholes that also include a reversible or restorable buffer zone should be taken as the ultimate goal. In practice, this is mainly possible for large forest owners, especially on state-owned lands.

In summary, the Finnish Environment Institute proposes that the criteria be returned for preparation based on the above grounds. In the definition of old-growth forests, the criteria proposed by the Ministry of the Environment –which also include old-growth forests as defined by the EU Commission – can also be used on healthland. In addition, a case-by-case judgement should be used for the criteria presented by the Ministry of the Environment and trade-offs should be used with regard to age, deadwood and supplementary indicators. Lower threshold values should be set for deadwood on poorly productive forest land and peatlands than in mineral soil forests.



Old-growth forests on state-owned lands

According to the Finnish Government's proposal, Metsähallitus Forestry Ltd will take an inventory of the sites located on state-owned lands and the protection solutions will be implemented under the guidance of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The Finnish Environment Institute believes that the competence and expertise of Metsähallitus' nature services and the Ministry of the Environment should be included as widely as possible in the guidelines for protection solutions. The work must be transparent and open. Nature organisations that have mapped state-owned forests must also be involved in the selection of sites.

The Finnish Environment Institute considers it important that the regional ecological planning's old-growth forests and other natural sites and ecological connections that generally meet the definition of old-growth forests and are already placed outside of wood production on state-owned lands but are still included in the forestry balance are immediately and strictly protected. The same applies to the natural economy areas of Lapland and the temporarily protected lichen woodlands and other old-growth forests in the Samí homeland that are important for reindeer herding.

With regard to state-owned forests, sufficiently extensive ecological buffer zones and the goals set by the Restoration Law for improving and restoring the status of boreal primary forests should also be taken into account. State-owned forests play a special role in Finland's biodiversity and climate commitments. The protection solutions must take into account the general goals of the Birds and Habitats Directives, the EU's biodiversity strategy and the Restoration Law for improving the natural state.

Based on the voluntary work of nature organisations, the "Luonnonmetsä" working group and the Sápmi working group have inventoried state-owned forests throughout Finland. In Southern Finland, only 6,000 hectares of forests have been found that are significant for biodiversity. Less than 100,000 hectares of valuable sites have been identified in northern Finland to the south of the Samí homeland. These are most likely forests that are valuable to biodiversity in accordance with the EU's biodiversity strategy and the Restoration Law, and their conservation would achieve an immediate agreement on the long-term protection of state-owned forests. It is likely that there are already forests excluded from forest management.

According to the Finnish Environment Institute, it seems that the Finnish Government has deliberately tried to keep the state-owned forests and their soils within the scope of heavy land use (mining industry, soil materials, plots, energy production, wood production) with the considerably demanding criteria for old-growth forests, and the Government has not comprehensively examined the goals and benefits for the state's land use. International commitments to halt biodiversity loss have apparently been considered to be secondary. Implementing this policy would be costly for Finland once, for example, the Restoration Law and its obligations enter into force.



Indigenous peoples' forests

The Finnish Environment Institute emphasises the need to take the rights of Sámi people into account in defining primary and old-growth forests and implementing the strict protection required by the EU. According to section 17, subsection 3 of the Constitution, indigenous Sámi people have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. A significant proportion of Finland's old-growth forests are located in the Samí homeland and, in particular, on state-owned lands. The Sámi community, such as the Sámi Parliament and reindeer herding cooperatives, must be able to participate in the preparation of conservation and land use decisions (section 9 of the Act on the Sámi Parliament), which is also a condition set by the EU Commission. The positive impacts of the protection of old-growth forests are particularly emphasised in the low-yielding, slow-growing forests in Northern Lapland. The protection of these old-growth forests is essential for the protection of the Sámi people's livelihood and culture. The Finnish Environment Institute believes that the Sámi community's message supports the goals of protecting old-growth forests in Finland in an important way, and effective cooperation with the Sámi people is crucial for ensuring the cultural sustainability of forest protection. An action plan for the protection and restoration of old-growth forests in Northern Lapland must be developed, taking into account the prior consent of the Sámi people (FPIC). Logging old forests in indigenous areas can damage the competitiveness of Finnish forestry and also weaken the conditions for tourism in Northern Finland.

Protecting old-growth forests on private lands

The Finnish Government proposes that the protection of old-growth forests be implemented on private lands through the METSO Programme. The Finnish Environment Institute points out that this requires extensions to the METSO Programme concerning regional and nature protection selection criteria, as METSO is currently tailored to the needs of the protection of forests in Southern Finland. Sufficient resources must be reserved for the voluntary protection of private lands, and the sites must be inventoried in the field.

The Finnish Environment Institute points out that, because the Finnish Government's proposal on the definition of old-growth forests is not in line with the EU's legislative acts or research data on forest biodiversity, a situation arises where some of the aged commercial forests remain in the so-called grey area due to conflicting interpretations regarding permitted actions. The management of such forests may potentially result in international sanctions afterwards. This is not in the interest of the Finnish forest sector, forestry companies or forest owners. Old-growth forests must be clearly defined and their definitions must take into account the EU guidelines and the ecological precautionary principle. The protection of old forests must be fully reimbursed to private forest owners.

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