

**Forest Academy for EU Decision Makers**  
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**Minister of Agriculture and Forestry**  
**Jari Leppä**

## Opening speech

Dear Participants to the Forest Academy,

I have the honour, and pleasure, to welcome you to the first Forest Academy that targets decision makers of the European Union. In Finland, the Forest Academy for Decision Makers has a long tradition. I am particularly happy that we are now organising the Academy together with Sweden. Forests are very important for Finns and Swedes alike.

The state of our forests is good. According to a recent inventory by the Natural Resources Institute Finland, there is more wood in Finnish forests than ever, 2.5 billion cubic metres. Every year forests sequester almost 40 million tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The growth of forests by far exceeds the harvesting volumes. New forest is planted or sown in every site where trees are cut. This principle has guided Finnish forestry for more than a hundred years. The first Forest Act of our country declared that "forests shall never be destroyed and bare".

The good state of Finnish forests is largely thanks to the 600,000 private forest owners. A key objective of our forest policy is that forest owners have the knowledge and tools to make choices according to their own targets. Besides focusing on wood production, these choices contribute to striking a balance between recreation and natural values.

Forest ownership is also being digitalised. Today it is possible to pay a virtual visit to one's forest, access public services electronically, and sell timber while lying on the couch at home. Yet, the truth is that there is nothing like a day spent outdoors in the woods – taking care of one's forest, hunting for game, or picking berries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just recently the EU published an updated Bioeconomy Strategy. Together with Sweden we are among the first countries to make the ambitious targets of the strategy a reality.

We are on the path towards the bioeconomy and circular economy. We use bio-based raw materials to substitute for fossil raw materials that pollute the environment. What is equally important is to utilise and circulate raw materials and side-streams. Today, what used to be waste is now raw material that is in great demand.

Wood is a fantastic raw material for multiple purposes. In addition to traditional uses in forest industry wood is also being processed in chemical industry and the food sector. Wood ingredients are utilised in cosmetics, medicines, adhesives and plastics. In future wood-based textiles may replace cotton and synthetic fibres. Higher and higher houses are built from wood.

I take this opportunity to also tell you that the European Commission has asked us to hold a broadly-based conference on the bioeconomy next summer as part of Finland's EU Presidency programme. During our Presidency we will promote the implementation of the EU Forest Strategy and strengthen its role to reach the targets set for the bioeconomy and energy and climate policy.

Dear Members of the Academy,

As we have seen this week, also in the United States, Finland and Sweden are well known in the world for our forest expertise. What we want to do is offer this expertise to find solutions to global challenges. I wish to tell you about an initiative put forward by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä that brings forests into the focus of the EU efforts to combat climate change.

The report of the International Panel on Climate Change IPCC again reminded us of the threat posed by the warming climate to life on earth. Forests are the most effective means to remove carbon dioxide. The Climate Panel called for action to prevent the loss of forest and significantly increase the world's forest area. This corresponds to a forest area that is the size of Europe.

We take this challenge very seriously. The goal is clear, but we need roadmap to get there.

President of the European Commission Juncker has proposed an alliance based on an equal partnership between Africa and Europe. This would be part on an investment programme worth tens of billions of euros, aimed to create employment for the growing numbers of young Africans.

Forests should also be incorporated into this partnership. Every year as much as 2 million hectares of forest is lost in Africa. One of the main reasons for this is the collection of firewood and clearing of arable land. Sustainable use of forests could, however, create employment and livelihood to the rural regions of Africa. Investments worth billions are needed in afforestation, forestry, and the management and protection of forests.

Finland has also proposed a forest fund to the European Commission, as part of the EU-Africa investment programme. Prime Minister Sipilä has presented our initiative to President Juncker, and I have presented it to Agriculture Commissioner Hogan. Last Monday, I also told about it to my colleagues at the Agriculture Council.

By investing in forests we can promote many of the Sustainable Development Goals. Forests strengthen the global carbon sink. Forests prevent erosion and maintain the microclimate, which is important for food security. Sustainably produced wood responds to the raw material needs of the growing population. And, forest management, forestry and forest industry offer work and prospects for future to young people in rural areas. At the same time we can protect virgin forests and prevent illegal trade in timber.

I am asking you all to support this initiative.

Dear Friends,

We do not have to go to African to plant forest. We can do this in Europe as well.

When coming here you must have noticed that, anywhere you look, there is forest. More than 70 per cent of Finland's surface area is covered with forest. Even if the loss of forest is not a problem in Finland, we

wish to show a good example by the way we act. At the moment we have a project under way that maps out land areas available for afforestation. The aim is to identify sites that would be the most effective in terms of strengthening the carbon sink.

Dear Forest Academics of the Future,

I wish you very welcome to the joint Finnish-Swedish Forest Academy. My firm belief is that forests and sustainable forest management are part of the solution to the greatest problems of our time. I hope that, after the Academy, you will share this view. Even if the month of November is quite cold, forests are well worth a visit at any time.

And now I give the floor to my good friend and colleague, Sven-Erik.