



Forest-based sector needs innovation and partnership **5th conference of the Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform held in Slovenia**

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If Europe's forest-based sector wants to live up to the manifold challenges of a rapidly changing and globalising society, it needs to strengthen its innovations and engage in partnerships within and outside the sector. This was the main message from the 5th conference of the Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform, held in Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, during May 19th-21st, 2008.

Arguably the most powerful 'call to arms' was delivered during the conference's closing session, by European Commissioner for Science and Research Janez Potočnik. Potočnik characterised the 21st century as an 'era of fragility', where Europe and the rest of the world are facing major challenges related to climate change, shortages of energy, water and raw materials, biodiversity loss, human health challenges and other issues. "You should and you will do your part of the job, otherwise we are in big trouble", said the Commissioner. With its potential contributions to e.g., climate change mitigation and energy security, the forest-based sector can be a key player in addressing present challenges.

Innovation for forest-based business

Prior to Potočnik's address, the 5th FTP Conference looked at the issue of innovation in the forest-based sector from many different sides, under the overall title 'Growing towards the Future – Joint innovation for successful forest-based business in Europe'. The event attracted about 200 participants from across Europe, as well as some delegates from North America. Local organiser was the Slovenian National Support Group of the FTP. The event was part of the Slovenian presidency of the European Union.

During the opening session of the conference, Žiga Turk, Slovenian Minister for Development and Growth, set the scene by stressing the importance of the forest-based sector in dealing with issues such as climate change. Mr. Turk showed a high awareness about the sector and its potential, which may not be surprising in a country where half of the land is covered by forests and where forestry is still a part of people's identity, as Turk mentioned. The first keynote speaker, Sten Nilsson of IIASA, then gave an excellent, eye-opening overview of global developments that are affecting the forest-based sector. The rapidly growing competition for raw materials and land, for example, has a major impact on the sector, as does climate change. Many global developments are so far-going and complex, Nilsson said, that the forest-based sector would be naive to think that it can face these developments all by itself. Integrative approaches and new business concepts will be required. The second keynote speaker, John Innes of the University of British Columbia, Canada, also stressed the need for new thinking in the forest-based sector. He mentioned that much more effort is required to make innovation work in terms of new products, new services, and new ways of doing things. Innes saw 'people management' as key to innovation, as optimal conditions should be created to foster creativity in research and business.



Panel debates

Part of the programme in Kranjska Gora consisted of lively panel debates. The first of these, under the overall conference theme, was moderated by British writer and broadcaster Chris Baines. The debate made it clear that innovation takes many different forms. For the forest-based sector, for example, innovation will be required not only in terms of value-added products and services, but also in terms of communication. The sector has several good stories to tell and should become more active in engaging in partnerships, for example when addressing the climate change agenda. Moreover, stressing the roles of the sector in addressing modern-day challenges as well as its focus on innovation will help attract talent. As mentioned by panel member Erich Wiesner of Building with Wood, there is a particularly large potential in promoting the role of wood as a sustainable and carbon-sequestering building material. One of the challenges the woodworking sector faces in this respect, Wiesner said, is that it is fragmented and consists primarily of smaller companies that do not have the same lobbying and marketing power as other actors in the construction sector. Magnus Hall, CEO of Holmen and also chairman of the FTP's High-Level Group, was calling for more good examples of cases where forest-based sector innovation has really worked, i.e. where state-of-art research had been transformed into new products or ways of doing things.

The second panel debate, held on the second conference day and moderated by Swedish editor Bengt Ek, looked more in detail on how to make innovation work. Contributions considered, among other, forest-based sector education and training, the links between the sector and climate change, and innovation at large. In the contribution on the latter by Claes-Göran Beckeman, who co-chairs a new FTP Task Force on this topic of innovation, an important distinction was made between research and innovation. Research, Beckeman said, requires money to generate knowledge. Innovation, on the other hand, uses knowledge to generate money. Beckeman also made a plea for the sector to take risks, otherwise innovation would never work. An interesting perspective from overseas was offered by Ron Brown of the Agenda 2020 Alliance, who showed that the forest-based sector in North America faces challenges very similar to those of Europe. Also here, partnership both within and outside the sector was sought. Brown called upon Europe to work closely together with partners from overseas. During the subsequent panel discussion emerged that the time frame of innovation is complex. Obviously innovation in the sector needs to be strengthened immediately, but innovation in terms of for example product innovation also takes time. This had also become clear during one of the satellite event at the conference, where four ongoing research and development projects under the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme presented their (preliminary) findings.

Taking up the challenge

In the closing session of the conference, FTP Project Director Wilhelm Vorher gave a brief summary of the conference, stressing some of the main lessons learnt. Moreover, he presented the work of the FTP so far, as summarised in a new booklet titled 'Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform: The first years'. This booklet shows, for example, that the FTP has succeeded in bringing the entire European forest-based sector together, resulting in a joint vision and research and development roadmap. Vorher presented the first copy of the booklet to European Commissioner Janez Potočnik.



Potočnik then delivered his stimulating closing address, starting off by showing his appreciation for the considerable effort the European forest-based sector has put into joining forces. This was needed, he said, in order to tackle the many challenges we are facing. Real innovation, where research results in new products, new services, and new ways of doing things, should be promoted. This requires close private-public partnerships, stressed Potočnik. He addressed the European forest-based industry by stating: *“Here we as European Commission are building on your views and your desires. If you are willing to bring in your ideas and knowledge, you can count on us for further support to further enhance research and innovation.”* The Commissioner strongly believed in the tool of European Technology Platforms (ETPs) to promote research, development and innovation in a truly collaborative way. He saw ETPs such as the FTP as one of the key instruments for realising the European Union’s Lisbon Agenda, which aims to turn Europe into a truly knowledge-based society. Greater integration and collaboration in research and innovation would be required to realise the European ambitions. *“We need to transform our present ‘team of stars’ into a true ‘star team’”*, Potočnik said.

It is now up to the FTP to take up this challenge, continuing to strengthen its uniting approach within the forest-based sector, as well as engaging in partnerships with other sectors. Some first steps to the latter have been taken. One of the conference’s parallel sessions brought together several European Technology Platforms under the umbrella of the Knowledge-Based Bio-Economy. The Platforms Plants for the Future, SusChem, Biofuels and the FTP declared their ambition to strengthen their partnership and work on a joint roadmap. Common issues included, for example, sustainable provision of plant material and bioenergy. This issue of innovation will remain central to the work of the FTP. It will also be on the agenda of the next FTP Conference, to be held in Sweden during autumn 2009.

Further information about the conference, a full programme, speaker profiles and all presentations are available on the FTP5 conference website, www.ftpc5.si. The document ‘Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform – The First years’ can be downloaded from the FTP website (www.forestplatform.org, under ‘Documents’).

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The Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform (FTP) is one of the European Technology Platforms, public-private partnerships endorsed by the European Commission with the aim to enhance sectoral research and development programmes. Within the FTP, industry, forest owners, and the research community work together towards a common goal - an innovative and globally competitive forest-based sector in Europe. FTP facilitates focused investments and fosters a more efficient approach to innovation, whilst stimulating coordination of European and national research agendas. It supports the ongoing development of a relevant knowledge-base for the sector and the application of emerging technologies. At the time, the FTP comprises a network of 24 National Support Groups, 15 of which have so far developed a National Research Agenda for the forest-based sector. For further information, please contact: Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform – FTP, Dr. Andreas Kleinschmit von Lengefeld, Project Secretary, The European Forestry House, 66, Rue du Luxembourg BE-1000 Bruxelles, Phone: +32 2 239 23 01; Fax: +32 2 219 21 91; Mobile: +32 484 758 543 ; e-mail: andreas.kleinschmit@cei-bois.org; www.forestplatform.org