

Strengthening networking in European Forest Research and expert services

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ABSTRACT

In the era of changing business environment for forest research and expert services, the European Forest Institute is developing its Regional Offices as the main instrument of pan-European networking. The establishment of the regional activities facilitates the policy-science cooperation with EFI Member countries, member organizations and international bodies. The first Regional Office started in 2007 in Barcelona, Spain, and since then four other offices have been established in Germany, France, Austria and Denmark.

KEY WORDS

European Forest Research, regional offices, research network

INTRODUCTION

There are visible signals that the business environment of the forest research is changing. The trends having an impact on forest research, its funding and organization include:

- Climate change is advancing, affecting ecosystem functioning and causing abrupt changes through natural disasters;
- Urban values are becoming more popular, creating new kind of pressure towards forests and forestry, and also new research needs;
- European energy policies will change the structure of wood and fibre consumption, and consequently, the wood markets; and
- Forestry and forests are more often seen as a part of a larger entity and fading away as separate concept in research, education and administration.

All the points above call for pan-European research, its efficient organization, and networking with other research fields and other professions. In the following, it is discussed how suitable the European Forest Institute's networking concept is for these tasks.

The thinking behind the establishment of the European Forest Institute (EFI) in 1993 was the need for a new organization that would focus on pan-European research issues and concerns and serve as an information centre in specific topic areas. EFI was founded as an association based on the Finnish law in October 1993. Since a modest base of twelve member organizations, the Institute has extended its membership by 2010 to 125 Associate and Affiliate Members in 33 European countries and in four countries outside Europe. These positive developments have confirmed both its relevance and role in Europe.

Based on extensive consultation of its member organizations and European States, a Convention on the European Forest Institute was agreed and signed by twenty countries in 2003. As the ratification process in the first eight countries was completed, EFI was established as an international organization in 2005 and the Finnish Association was abolished. The ratifying countries thus became Member countries of EFI, and the organizational members have since then been called Associate Members (located in Europe) and Affiliate Members (those outside of Europe). By now, the number of the ratifying countries is 21. The Member countries form the Council, the highest decision-making body of the EFI whereas the member organizations meet at the Annual Conference.

Today, EFI is a forest research network consisting of the following core units: the Headquarters (HQ), the network elements outside HQ namely the Regional Offices (ROs), Project Centres (PCs) addressing special issues on a fixed term basis, and Associate/Affiliate Members, thus comprising a broad institutional and expert network. EFI has altogether 70 employees and an annual budget of seven million euros. It has a Project Centre in Portugal and Regional Offices in Spain, Germany, France, Austria and Denmark. The sixth Regional Office will be established in Croatia in 2010.

The total forest research capacity in Europe in the National Forest Research Institutes is approximately 3000 researcher-years annually, and the universities and other institutes account close to the same amount. This means that EFI represents only a couple of percents of the European research capacity. Therefore, the role of EFI is rather in networking and catalyzing than in conducting large volumes of projects.

In this context the strengths of the EFI network are:

- member countries,
- member organizations,
- establishment of regional activities with the European dimension,
- potential to represent its network in the European scale issues, and
- potential to become the main interface between forest policy makers and the analysis of such policies on the European scale.

KEY FUNCTIONS

The key actions of the institute are as follows:

- EFI facilitates and stimulates forest research networking at the pan-European level.

To allow efficient mobilisation of research capacities to respond to emerging needs, and to facilitate co-operation with other relevant fields of research, EFI provides a platform, an effective infrastructure and networking services to its member organisations and the forest and research community as a whole.

- EFI conducts research and provides expertise on the pan-European level.

Research issues of pan-European interest are best addressed by an international research organisation with a network of leading experts. Conducting quality research of its own supports the integration of EFI into the scientific community and increases credibility in performing its other core activities.

- EFI promotes the supply of unbiased and policy-relevant information on European forests and forestry.

To satisfy the various needs for value-added, science-based information, EFI compiles and disseminates information on European forests and forestry for a broad base of target groups. These target groups benefit from having easy access to information and expertise at their disposal.

- EFI advocates for forest research and for scientifically sound information as a basis for policy-making on forests in Europe.

The forest research community in Europe needs to address the role of science-based information in decision- and policy-making and on the other hand, it needs to maintain and upgrade its research capacity in order to fulfill the information needs. The added value of EFI's advocacy role for the research community is in an improved access of forest research institutions to political and industrial decision makers on the EC and member state level, thus enhancing support for funding of scientific projects and programmes.

- EFI provides policy services for Member countries and the EC.

International organizations, such as EFI, are facing expanding opportunities in providing expert

services, policy advice and facilitation for EU, EU member states and national governments. The need for aid delivery via international organisations on behalf of the EU and its member states is increasing due to the scarce resources of their forest related administrations.

BUILDING THE NETWORK

The key function networking includes the following aims:

- EFI has a three-level infrastructure in which each interested partner can choose the appropriate level for participation. The objective is to enable Associate and Affiliate Members to accomplish their tasks more efficiently through better co-operation, mobilization of research capacities and pooling of available resources.
- There is an active and integrated research network of Headquarters and Regional Offices which are geographically well distributed over Europe and which are well recognised in their respective regions.

EFI Council has endorsed the establishment of maximum seven Regional Offices for the time being. They should have a regional function in the European area, e.g. Mediterranean, Atlantic, Central, Central-East, Central-Southeast, Northern, Russian. This means that the topics addressed by an RO should be of relevance to the region concerned, not excluding relevance at a broader level as well. They should implement EFI strategies in their activities and have a strong integration to the EFI Headquarters (Fig. 1).

EFI Regional Offices are also in line with the EU Green Paper on the European Research Area – ERA (europa.eu/research/era/consultation-era_en.html). The ERA concept defines a European internal market for

research where researchers, technology and knowledge can freely circulate, and which provides effective co-ordination of national and regional research activities, programmes and policies, as well as initiatives implemented at the European level.

REGIONAL OFFICES

The benefits of the Regional Offices for the Member countries, member organizations, stakeholders and EFI include the following:

- Regional Offices can provide a platform for implementing the goals and principles of the European Research Area in the field of forest research.
- They allow the regions to benefit from EFI's pan-European network and research expertise.
- They help regional experts, institutions and governments to address issues of importance for their regions in a European context.
- They can pool financial and other resources for tackling important issues.
- They reduce the fragmentation of the research structures.
- They increase the effectiveness of the participating institutes through co-ordinated collaboration.
- They allow EFI to be more visibly present in different parts of Europe.

EFI currently has five operating Regional Offices (EFIMED, EFICIENT, EFIATLANTIC, EFICEEC and EFINORD) and one in the establishment phase (EFI-SEE). The first EFI Regional Office, Mediterranean Regional Office EFIMED, was established as a pilot in July 2007. EFIMED focuses on forest issues of particular importance to the Mediterranean region, including non-timber values of forests. EFICIENT – a joint initiative by Eastern France, Southern Germany and Swit-

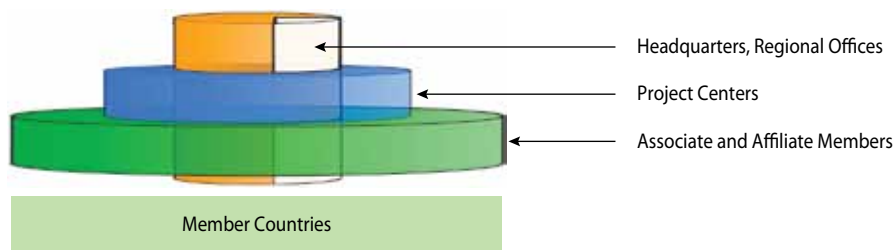


Fig. 1. EFI's Regional Offices as an integrated part of the EFI network in various European regions

zerland – is focusing on Central Europe. EFICENT addresses with its activities Central European research needs and through its integral part, ‘Observatory for European Forests (OEF)’ based in Nancy, France, supports EFI in constituting a recognised provider of pan-European information and information products. EFI-ATLANTIC covers the regions of the Atlantic Rim. The general topic of EFIATLANTIC is the sustainable management and competitive utilization of planted forest resources. Central-East European Regional Office – EFICEEC – is based in Vienna, Austria, and it covers a region extending from the Baltic Countries down to the South Eastern Europe. EFICEEC has three broad work areas: forest sector policy and economics, land use change in the context of climate change and bio-energy, and forest ecosystem management.

EFINORD – an initiative by the Nordic Countries started in Copenhagen, Denmark, in the spring of 2010. The Forest Research Institute (IBL) is one of the main partners of EFINORD. Research in EFINORD includes two main themes: 1) Biomass Production and Technology, and 2) Ecosystem Services. In addition, three cross-cutting themes are incorporated in the research programme of EFINORD: Climate Change, Environmental Economics, and Governance and Policy. One of the main research themes ‘Biomass Production and Technology’ includes research and development within bioenergy, forest operations, wood material science and forest industries. The other main research theme ‘Ecosystem Services’ concentrates

on research and development within non-wood forest products, urban forestry (including recreation and health), biodiversity, water resources, and forest and landscape restoration.

The South-East European Regional Office EFI-SEE, will be based in Varaždin, Croatia, planned to be launched in late 2010. In the initial phase, EFISEE R&D activities will be oriented towards forest policy and economics issues in relation to environment, urban forestry, private forests and ecology.

CONCLUSIONS

The process of implementing network strategies through Regional Offices – discussions among staff, Member countries and member organizations, Board members and Scientific Advisory Board members – have already helped to identify the potentials and challenges of a network organization like EFI, to utilize the potentials and find its niche and clientele in the changing business environment. In the coming years, Regional Offices will be the main organizational elements of the networking function in EFI and they must provide added value to the Member countries, member organizations, EFI and all other stakeholders. The bodies representing the Member countries and the member organizations, the Council and the Annual Conference, will provide the instrument in assessing the success of achieving this goal.