

# Meeting on the challenges of planting trees for the 3 Billion Trees Pledge

24 June 2024 – Online meeting

## Event Overview

The online workshop on "3 Billion Additional Trees Pledge: challenges for tree planting" was organised to discuss the challenges faced by tree planting organisations within the project to support the implementation of the European Commission's pledge to plant 3 billion additional trees by 2030. The meeting brought together representatives from several organisations involved in tree planting across the EU, including Plant for the Planet, Land Life, Treedom, WE4ALL, EcoTree, Life Terra and Reforest Action. The aim was to collect views on the challenges experienced by these organisations when planting trees for the EU 3 Billion Trees Pledge and discuss potential solutions.

The meeting covered a range of themes crucial to the success of large-scale tree planting initiatives. Participants discussed the importance of considering the 3 Billion Trees Pledge ecological conditions when planning tree planting projects, particularly in light of changing climate patterns and biodiversity loss. The challenges of land availability and conflicting interests in land use emerged as significant obstacles, with many organisations struggling to secure suitable sites for planting. Funding emerged as a critical issue, with most participants reporting heavy reliance on private funding and expressing a need for more direct EU and national financial support. Legal and administrative hurdles, including complexities surrounding carbon credit rights, were also highlighted as major challenges. The importance of long-term management and commitment to tree maintenance and the need for capacity building in tree planting practices were emphasised throughout the discussion. Participants also explored the potential for collaborative efforts among tree planting organisations and the role of both public and private sectors in supporting these initiatives. The meeting highlighted the complex interplay of ecological, economic, and social factors that influence tree planting efforts across Europe, with participants sharing their experiences and proposing several recommendations for addressing these challenges.

## Detailed Event Overview

### Marta Ballesteros, Senior Lawyer at Milieu Consulting SRL

Marta Ballesteros opened the meeting by welcoming participants and outlining the objectives of the project led by Milieu to support the implementation of the EU 3 Billion Trees Pledge. She emphasized the need to focus the discussion on the challenges of tree planting organisations within the 3 Billion Trees Pledge, that are not only related to planting the right trees in the right place but also to their long-term maintenance and management. This long-term objective relates to the Closer to Nature principle within Sustainable Forest management developed under the EU Forest Strategy 2030 whose implementation Milieu is supporting through another project for the Commission aiming to ensure reinforced sustainable forest management for biodiversity, climate change, and forest resilience with a closer-to-nature approach.

### Marco Onida, Senior Expert at European Commission, Directorate Environment

Marco Onida presented an overview of the 3 Billion Trees Pledge as one of the EU initiatives under the EU Forest Strategy 2030, emphasizing that while forests are managed by territories and local authorities, the EU has a shared competence to legislate on forests as part of the environment policy. He highlighted several challenges facing European forests, including intensive timber use, increasing natural disturbances, and loss of biodiversity. Onida highlighted that the EU's pledge to plant 3 billion additional trees by 2030 is a voluntary scheme which requires political support. He stressed the importance of planting the right tree, in the right place and in the right way. While the European Commission does not have a budget line to financially support planting trees organisations, it provides guidelines and communication support for such initiatives, encouraging participation and monitoring the number of trees planted. DG ENV highlighted that Article 13 of the Nature Restoration Law requires Member States when implementing the restoration obligations to contribute to the commitment of planting at least three billion additional trees by 2030 at Union level.

## Challenges and Discussion Points

Martina Fondi from Treedom emphasized the need to frame the discussion with a critical point: Despite being halfway through the timeline, less than 1% of the pledge target had been achieved, highlighting the urgent need to address ongoing challenges.

### Ecological Conditions and Biodiversity

Participants discussed the importance of planting trees with consideration for biodiversity and climate change. Martina highlighted the challenges of planting in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy, where extreme drought conditions necessitate additional support and irrigation for newly planted trees. She emphasised that climate change is altering ecosystems, sometimes making it impossible for traditional species to survive in their historical habitats. This shift requires a flexible approach to species selection and planting strategies.

Jordi Juanos from Plant for the Planet stressed the importance of restoring entire ecosystems rather than simply planting trees. He highlighted their work in areas like the Doñana Natural Park in Spain, where they plan planting activities during the different seasons three years in advance, working with regional government nurseries to ensure appropriate species selection and quantities. Jordi Juanos also pointed out the need for incentives for forest management alongside tree planting, citing examples where unmanaged, dense forests have led to increased fire risks and a recent example when tens of thousands of recently planted pine trees burned down.

DG ENV referred to new technologies for irrigation that might facilitate planting trees in dry regions. They suggested reconsidering planting strategies if conditions are not suitable for tree growth. Land life presented the Cocoon innovative technology developed by them, which mitigate drought but face funding challenges due to high implementation costs. Fondo from Treedom confirmed their success with various water-saving technologies, including the Cocoon technology for planting trees but whose use is limited to certain circumstances, resulting in only around 6000 trees planted. Juanos stressed the strategic importance of planting in dry areas, mentioning the need of a “green belt” in southern Europe. He also noted that while irrigation is expensive, it is still cheaper than using these innovative technologies.

### Land Availability and Conflicting Interests

Several participants noted the difficulty in finding suitable land for tree planting. Jordi Juanós mentioned that in Spain, they face challenges in accessing land, especially public land, even when working on restoring burned areas. He suggested the need for incentives for landowners to make their land available for tree planting. The discussion revealed a complex situation where even when land is available, there are often competing interests or lack of resources for long-term maintenance.

Sven Kallen from Life Terra shared an example from the Netherlands, where the government pledge to plant 33 million trees faced significant hurdles when it came to actual implementation at provincial and municipal levels due to competing land use priorities. Dimitri D'Helft from Reforest'Action pointed out a mismatch between land availability and funding. He noted that while countries like Romania and Ireland have available land, it's often difficult to find funding for projects in these areas as companies prefer to fund projects in their own countries or markets (e.g. in Spain, France or Germany).

### Funding and Financial Models

A major topic of discussion was the lack of public funding for tree planting initiatives. Participants unanimously reported that 95-100% of their funding comes from private sources. They expressed a desire for more direct EU funding for tree planting projects, with several participants noting the challenges of accessing funds through existing EU programs like LIFE due to high administrative burdens and programmatic requirements such as innovation or specific research questions. The LIFE Programme's requirements on innovative approaches exclude most continuous tree-planting projects from funding opportunities.

DG ENV acknowledged the funding difficulties from EU programmes while considered that there is a very low probability that a direct funding line for 3BT is adopted by the EU Institutions responsible for the EU budget (the Council of the European Union and the EU Parliament)

Although Sven Kallen agreed with the difficulties to access LIFE funding for tree-planting projects, he shared an example how Life Terra managed to secure funding from the LIFE Programme by adding innovative approaches of educational activities, monitoring and tagging tools in relation to tree-planting projects. In response to DG ENV announcement of their intention to explore the possibility to use Living Labs within Horizon Europe programme, Martina Fondi mentioned their participation in a Living Labs project that included multiple innovative elements and project management activities that resulted in very few trees planted. Further, public funding is hard to access for scaling up the quantity of planted trees.

Angelica Bercetche from Land Life emphasised the need for a more streamlined process to access EU funding that doesn't distract from the primary mission of planting trees. She also highlighted the

significant costs associated with planting trees, including the preparation, stakeholder engagement, and long-term management required for successful afforestation.

Louisiane Guezel from EcoTree raised concerns about the Carbon Removal Certification Framework (CRCF), suggesting it might negatively impact forestry projects by classifying them as only "temporary" carbon sinks. This classification potentially makes them less attractive to companies looking to invest in carbon credits, especially when compared to technological solutions such as CCS classified as "permanent" carbon removal. Although the clients of EcoTree are interested in the biodiversity co-benefits of the CRCS, there is a risk in relying on ex-ante carbon credits of nature-based solutions that will store carbon in the future. Moreover, Sven Kallen from Life terra argued that companies avoid taking action given the voluntary nature of the current commitments. He suggested that if the EU Commission was serious about the 3BT, certain measures should be taken such as requiring companies to get involve, more forests could be created to offset environmental impacts. DG ENV referred to Member States requirements under the Nature Restoration Law which might translate into national legislation setting obligations on other actors.

In addition, Martina Fondi from Treedom suggested offering companies certain advantages as an incentive for participation in the 3 Billion Trees Pledge, rather than focusing solely on the importance of tree planting.

### **Legal and Administrative Challenges**

Participants discussed various legal and administrative hurdles. These included issues related to carbon credit rights, which often belong to polluting companies or emitting landowners rather than the organisations planting the trees, which do not emit. This situation can create disincentives for tree planting organisations, as they cannot benefit from the carbon credits generated by their work.

Louisiane Guezel mentioned that public authorities often require costly ecological diagnoses before allowing planting, which can be a significant financial and time burden for planting organisations. The group discussed the need for more flexibility in these requirements and potential financial assistance for such pre-planting assessments.

There was also mention of the lack of clarity on permitting procedures and forest land ownership in some areas, which can complicate and delay planting efforts.

### **Capacity and Education**

The need for education and capacity building was highlighted across multiple levels. John Iliopoulos from WE4ALL shared their approach of empowering local communities and municipalities to carry out planting projects in their own lands or villages, which helps to scale up efforts and reduce costs. He stressed the importance of engaging and educating local stakeholders to ensure the success and longevity of planting projects.

Participants suggested that there should be initiatives to promote capacity building for tree planting at various levels, including public administrations, local communities, and within planting organisations themselves. The idea of creating a platform or forum linking participants to the meeting to exchange information on new technologies and best practices for tree planting and management was proposed.

### **Long-term Commitment and Maintenance**

The challenge of ensuring long-term commitment to tree maintenance was a recurring theme. Participants noted that the costs of maintaining planted trees can be significant, especially for small landowners and in areas prone to extreme weather conditions. Jordi Juanos shared an example from



Granada, Spain, where unexpected drought conditions required them to irrigate newly planted trees 11 times, significantly increasing project costs. It was estimated that additional irrigation costs last year were about EUR 5-6000 due to the lack of rain. Jordi Juanos also highlighted the need for long-term land access agreements with owners to facilitate proper planning and planting of suitable trees species over multiple seasons.

The discussion highlighted the need for funding models that account not just for initial planting, but also for long-term care and maintenance of trees. Participants stressed that without proper aftercare, many planted trees may not survive, undermining the goals of the 3 Billion Trees Pledge.

### **Proposed Solutions and Recommendations by the participating organizations**

1. Development of more straightforward EU funding mechanisms specifically for tree planting projects. Consideration of a specific EU program or budget line to support tree planting for the 3 Billion Trees Pledge. The European Parliament has the capacity to push for the establishment of such a specific programme to support the 3 billion Trees Pledge. Organisations might want to meet/discuss it with the new European Parliament through a hearing.
2. Creation of incentives or "privilege treatment" for actors planting trees with conservation and sustainable development objectives. ~~This means prioritizing organisations focused on large-scale tree-planting efforts over those planting smaller numbers.~~
3. The European Commission to consider introducing digital badges for acknowledging tree-planting projects under the pledge.
4. Establishment of a platform or forum to exchange information on new technologies for tree planting and management.
5. Revision of the Carbon Removal Certification Framework to better support forestry and tree planting projects with biodiversity and other ecological conditions. For example, by better acknowledging nature-based solutions, by making biodiversity co-benefits mandatory, and removing the difference between temporary and permanent carbon removal.
6. It was suggested that tree planting organisations come together to draft a position paper or open letter to address some of the challenges discussed, particularly regarding the Carbon Removal Certification Framework.
7. Development of mechanisms to encourage public landowners to allocate land for tree plantations.
8. Creation of educational initiatives to promote capacity building for tree planting at various levels.
9. Exploration of ways to transfer carbon credit rights from landowners/emitting companies to tree planting organizations as a mean to finance tree planting.
10. Internalising management costs in the tree-planting price.

### **Closing Remarks and Future Directions**

Marco Onida concluded the meeting by emphasising the importance of the discussions for informing the implementation of the 3 Billion Trees Pledge and the EU Forest Strategy 2030. He acknowledged the challenges raised by the participants and expressed a commitment to consider their feedback in shaping future actions.

The insights and experiences shared during the meeting will contribute to shaping future actions in support of the 3 Billion Trees Pledge. The participants expressed interest in continued collaboration and dialogue with the European Commission to address the challenges and promote sustainable tree planting practices across Europe.