

Effects of climate change on forestry management in the Jurassic arc region – preliminary assessment

Federal Office for the Environment

Key facts

An exchange with the Regional Audit Office of Burgundy-Franche-Comté led the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) to look at the effects of climate change on Swiss forestry management. At nearly CHF 663 million, the forestry programme agreement represents the largest federal contribution in the environmental area for the 2020 to 2024 period. The SFAO's assessment focused firstly on forests in the Jurassic arc region – which border on France – and then extended to cover national forestry policies and strategies.

In the opinion of experts in this field, climate change has taken hold much more rapidly than expected and has been impacting Swiss forests for several years now. Beech trees are suffering from drought and bark beetles are attacking spruces. This is compounded by damage from storms and fire, which can destroy hectares of forest in a matter of hours.

The SFAO conducted a preliminary assessment to determine the questions and details for an audit. Following this analysis, it found that an audit would bring little added value, given the studies currently available and ongoing, as well as the timetable of forthcoming revisions.

The legal framework and the strategic objectives of forestry policy take account of climate change

Since 2017, the Forest Act has incorporated adaptation to climate change, the fight against harmful organisms and the strengthening of wood harvesting activities. The legal framework supports Swiss forests right up to Constitution level, which enumerates their protective, economic and social functions.

Adaptation to climate change is a priority subject in forestry management. The Federal Council report published in December 2022 in response to the Hêche motion¹ and the Vara postulate² permitted various action areas and specific measures to be proposed to adapt forests to climate change. That report, as well as the one on forest fires (January 2022) will serve as a basis for drawing up the new comprehensive forestry and wood strategy planned for 2025.

As part of its monitoring of the programme agreements, the FOEN commissions audits which it takes into account when refining its strategies. The programme agreements are also subject to annual cantonal reports and spot checks.

By contrast, the FOEN does not carry out any specific assessment of the efficient use of funds by the cantons. In principle, the cantons contribute the same level of funding as the Confederation. The risk of paying an overly generous subsidy is thus limited. If the cantons fail to provide the agreed funding, the FOEN demands a refund.

¹ 19.4177 – A global strategy to adapt forests to climate change. Motion by Claude Hêche (25.09.2019)

² 20.3750 – Adapt forests to a warming climate. What about biodiversity? Postulate by Céline Vara (18.06.2020)

The problems observed in France do not exist in Switzerland, or are managed differently. As a result, a joint evaluation is not regarded as necessary. From the funding perspective, the fact that the programme agreements are renewed every four years allows Switzerland to adapt rapidly to changing situations and needs. Changes are possible within a period, such as those in response to the Fässler motion, which called for sustainable forestry management and use to be guaranteed.³ The forestry programme agreements thus received an additional CHF 25 million annually for the years 2021 to 2024.

Programme agreements are subject to continuous monitoring

Over recent years, the environment-related programme agreements have been subject to several studies and evaluations commissioned by the FOEN, which is in negotiations with the cantons about the next programme agreement period. In addition, an SFAO audit published in 2022 recommended that the FOEN draw up risk-based supervision concepts for all programme agreements and a detailed timetable for their implementation.⁴ Over the long term, a follow-up of this recommendation should make it possible to ensure that it will be implemented as part of the forestry programme agreements.

In this context – a revised strategy, new measures aimed at the long term and amended legislation – it does not appear appropriate for the SFAO to carry out an audit. This report is the result of a preliminary assessment. It presents the current context of the policy on the impact of climate change on forestry management in the Jurassic arc region, as well as the reasons why the SFAO considers that a new evaluation would not bring added value at this stage.

Original text in French

³ 20.3745 – Guarantee sustainable forestry management and use. Motion by Daniel Fässler (18.06.2020)

⁴ "Management and supervision of measures against road noise" (audit mandate 21153), available on the SFAO website.