Working actively together to shape the future of our forests – joining forces to withstand and combat climate change

LIECO Forum 2021: Forestry sector meeting in Vienna

Vienna – The second LIECO Forum was held at Liechtenstein Garden Palace in Vienna on November 11, 2021, with around 170 participants and amid strict Covid-19 protocols. First-rate presentations, including the latest research results, as well as lively, sometimes controversial, debate, ensured that the mood was one of optimism. At the end of the day, everyone agreed that the situation is serious, a great deal is expected of forests in terms of providing a solution to the problem of climate change and, for this reason, the question of how to shape the future must now be addressed collectively, and with courage. Close and constructive cooperation between policymakers, researchers, the timber-processing industry and forestry practitioners is essential to the survival of the entire value-added chain, from forest to timber.

In his opening address, **Constantin Liechtenstein, CEO of the Liechtenstein Group**, pointed to precarious position of forest owners and the forestry sector: elevated temperatures, low precipitation and widespread bark beetle infestation have all caused huge losses in many regions. Added to this is increasing public pressure in the form of the controversial and often emotive debate over reducing forest areas available for wood supply (FAWS) versus the practice of sustainable forestry. For Constantin Liechtenstein, location-adapted afforestation is the key basis of future sustainable forestry.

"As longstanding forest owners, the question of climate-fit forests has been one of our prime concerns for many years already and, through LIECO, our aim is to make a positive contribution. For this reason, we are investing in research and development and specifically in breeding more resilient, high-quality trees. We firmly believe there is a need to catch up in this area, and over the next few years, R&D must be driven forward," stressed **Constantin Liechtenstein**.

In her welcoming remarks, **Elisabeth Köstinger, Austrian Federal Minister for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism,** also stressed the importance of working together with experts in R&D, explaining the value of bringing together different interest groupings so as to benefit not only from scientific findings but also from practical experience, setting a course for the forest of the future. Indeed, the forest not only plays a role as a major carbon store, but is also an important contributor to the economy: "The sustainable use of timber, a renewable material, helps to protect the climate, while at the same time benefiting the local economy and creating regional jobs."

In his keynote speech 'Building A Global Restoration Movement from Local Action', **Prof. Dr. Tom Crowther** from **Crowtherlab ETH Zürich** presented the digital platform 'Restor', use of which was demonstrated again in the afternoon by **Restor CEO Clara Rowe.** The interdisciplinary research work undertaken by Crowtherlab has yielded important findings on how the global restoration of ecosystems has the capacity to counteract climate change. The afforestation of woodland has a significantly greater impact in terms of combating climate change than originally thought. Ecological mapping instruments and platforms such as Restor are able to pool and enhance global afforestation efforts. The key to successful restoration of ecosystems is to find the innovations that make the protection of biodiversity an economically viable option for local communities.

Prof.Dipl.-Ing.Dr.DDr.h.c. Hubert Hasenauer, Rector of the **University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences** in Vienna, spoke on the role of the forest in climate change. On the one hand, forests play a positive role as binders of CO_2, while on the other, they are negatively impacted by the changed climatic conditions affecting their growth. The forestry sector has the options of adaptation (choice of tree species) and mitigation (afforestation programs, as well as carbon sequestration, which includes the use of timber as a raw material). Prof. Hasenauer added it was important to stress that timber replaces fossil fuels and materials, and that sustainable forestry therefore protects the climate. In addition, he argued in favor of a CO_2-neutral circular economy.

In his presentation, **Dipl. Bio. Dr. Silvio Schüler** from the **Austrian Research Centre for Forests** pointed out how "the transfer of seeds and plants from domestic forest trees presents a hitherto barely-used opportunity to adapt future forests to climate change and strengthen their role over the long term as carbon sinks and providers of raw materials." Nature cannot keep up with the pace of climate change, and the stocks and provenances we have here today are only partially suitable for natural regeneration. Current recommendations on provenance need to be reviewed. Through the active introduction of seeds and plants from more southerly, drier regions, we can enable forests to adapt to climate change much faster.

Prof. Dr. Thomas Knoke, from Munich Technical University (Professor Institute of Forest Management) explained that, according to his calculations and simulations, richly-structured and species-rich forests have the capacity to recover faster following disturbance and damage (resilience). Mixed stocks with a high proportion of Douglas fir (70% – 75%), spruce (10% – 15%) and beech represented the optimum, in economic terms, in the right locations. Combinations including Swiss pine may also be very advantageous in future. These calculations are based on high-quality certified plant material with an initial count of 1,100 per hectare.

In a concluding podium discussion under the heading 'Forests of the future – to manage, preserve, or design?', representatives from forestry, politics and the timber industry debated under the moderation of **Prof. Dr. Ute Seeling** from the **School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences** in Berne, Switzerland:

DI Maria Patek from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism expressed her concern that too much is being asked of the forest as a carbon store; forests cannot offset all emissions. Indeed, climate change is advancing too fast for forests to be left to their own devices. For this reason, she explained, the Ministry is backing sustainable forest management and investing in research and development to support forest owners. She also perceives a considerable need for advice and communication at local level.

DI Christian Skilich of Lenzing AG referred to the big dilemma on the part of timber buyers; the pulp industry in particular needs to know today what tree types can be anticipated in 30 years' time, and this data is not yet fully available. Nevertheless, he added, the timber industry stands behind local forestry, with timber imports considered only as a last resort and, instead, as much domestic fallen timber as possible being processed in order to support domestic forestry operations.

Dr. Erich Wiesner of the WIEHAG Group also set out the importance of using timber as a construction material and long-term carbon store. Indeed, he explained, climate change is actually boosting the timber industry, since many investors are coming under pressure due to the constraints imposed on their investment activities, leading to a substantially higher demand for timber as a construction material. After many years 'fighting' against other construction materials, timber construction is now finally on a par with cement and steel. Looking to the future, he is optimistic, since science has already come up with many new approaches, and collective efforts will undoubtedly bear fruit, ensuring the availability of materials.

Markus Graf von Hoyos from **Guts- und Forstverwaltung Horn**, a forest owner who has been particularly hard hit by disasters, urged that a commensurate price should be put on the carbon storage capacity of forests since, so far, added value had mainly been the preserve of industry. Many forest managers are in a situation where, within the next one or two generations, they will no longer see any income from their devastated forests. Alternative sources of income, such as renewable energy or agroforestry, will need to be sought until timber becomes viable again. Policymakers need to support the forestry sector in finding solutions.

Josef Liegl of the **Forstwirtschaftliche Vereinigung Oberpfalz** also explained how forest owners need revenues to cover the period from planting to timber harvest. Ultimately, forest managers and industry have the same goals, and it is a shared responsibility to fight for the preservation of forest management as a permitted activity. With regard to tree species for the timber construction of the future, like many who had spoken before him, Mr Liegl indicated that Douglas fir represents a realistic alternative to the endangered spruce. Efforts are also being made to incorporate more hardwood into timber construction, although sawable softwoods, and spruce in particular, will still have a vital part to play in future due to their particular properties.

About LIECO

Since 1985, LIECO GmbH & Co KG has been producing high-quality containerized forest seedlings, offering a unique system for successful afforestation. Following the purchase of F.O Lürssen GmbH in 2020, the company is continuing on a growth path and is now the leading forest seedling supplier in the DACH region, with six production locations, a total area under cultivation of 335 hectares, and annual sales of almost 30 million forest seedlings. The company offers a wide range of containerized seedlings, including bare-rooted forest seedlings, as well as a wide range of forest services.

Media contact:

Mechthild Foet: presse@kontor.gmbh