

International Day of Forests **Press release of the PROFORBIOMED project**

In Mediterranean countries, forest covers about 70 million hectares, about 25% of the total land area and it has been increasing remarkably. During the last decade, the average annual rate of change of forest cover has been about 2%. The main reasons for such changes are large-scale afforestation and reforestation programs, as well as the natural expansion of forest into agricultural lands, grasslands and pastures, after been abandoned as a consequence of the decline of the primary sector's importance after the blast-off of the industrial development and the socio-economic growth.

In spite of that, high population density and urbanization in coastal areas, the development of mass tourism, the quick rise in consumption and intensive farming practices are increasing pressures on these forests. Serious threats to forests are represented by air pollution, climate change, and more intense and frequent wildfires.

By providing multiple ecosystem services — such as soil protection, water supply, carbon sequestration or recreation — woodlands have been playing an essential role in the day-to-day lives of peoples of Mediterranean countries, as well as in their socio-economic activities.

Furthermore forests provide wood for industry and for energy. In some Mediterranean countries wood for fuel is still the most important single source of renewable energy and as important as all other renewable energy sources altogether.

Proforbiomed—acronym of "Promotion and renewable energy and improvement of energy efficiency"—a project funded by the MED Programme, a EU transnational cooperation programme among the "Territorial Cooperation objective" of the EU Cohesion Policy, has been set up with the aim to develop the use of forest biomass. *Proforbiomed* also aims at providing support and tools to biomass producers, forest owners, forest-based companies, industries, local and regional authorities and end-users for the implementation of strategies for mobilising this important resource, without increasing the pressures on forest and harming the environment.

In Italy the environmentally compatible biomass potential amounts to 9 million tonnes of wood. Large part of it would derive from the utilisation of coppices. Other contributions may derive from logging residues after removals of wood for industry, pruning and thinning of tree forest plantations, from other wooded lands, from hedgerows, and from the establishment of dedicated forest short rotation plantations. In total this biomass potential represents around 2,9 million ton oil equivalents, which is about 1,7 percent of the current primary energy consumption of Italy.

Increasing the sustainable use of wood for energy from forest resources may offer significant prospects for governments, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the fulfilment of UN climate change mitigation and adaptation policies, as well as implementation of EU energy policies. The valorisation of forest bioenergy creates local jobs, stirs up public-private cooperation, generates value for owners and forest-energy industry, improves forest management and reduces risks of wildfires.

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