

Białowieża forest is the best preserved forest ecosystem and the last low-land deciduous old-growth forest in Europe. It hosts Europe's largest bison population. Białowieża forest has been designated as Natura 2000 site and UNESCO World Heritage site, yet it is under threat as permission was consequence of the Polish Environment Minister's decision, in March 2016, to triple logging in the forest. The ministry attempts to justify this intensification of logging with alleged need to tackle a bark beetle outbreak. However, bark beetle outbreaks and dying spruce trees are natural processes that have been shaping the Białowieża forest for centuries. Both scientists and the public strongly oppose large-scale cutting of trees in the forest. More than 140,000 Poles signed an online appeal for the protection of Białowieża forest.

On 23 May, seven Polish and international NGOs filed a complaint to the European Commission to warn that Poland had breached Articles 6(2) and 6(3) of the Habitats Directive and Article 4(4) of the Birds Directive (by virtue of Article 7 of the Habitats Directive). **The Polish Ministry of Environment announced the start of logging operations on 24 May 2016. The imminent increase in logging rates will create damage that cannot be undone. We therefore urge the European Commission to fast-track the infringement procedure and to impose interim measures to stop the logging operations.**

Białowieża forest is characterised by natural processes and has seen little human intervention and impact compared to other European forests. The Polish area of the Białowieża Forest (630 km²) in its entirety protected as a Natura 2000 site (PLC200004) and a transboundary UNESCO World Heritage Site. One-third of the Polish area of the forest is protected as a national park and nature reserves (strictly protected areas), while the remaining two-thirds are subject to forest management.



In 2008, the European Commission launched a procedure of a structured dialogue (EU pilot) with Poland because of intensive wood extraction in the Białowieża forest. Negotiations resulted in a compromise: the logging limit was lowered and set at the level of wood needed to fulfil local community demand. As a result, in 2013, the Commission closed the structured dialogue. The increase of wood extraction approved in March 2016 by the Ministry of Environment is three times higher than the previous logging limit (raised from c. 63,000 to 188,000 m³) and breaches EU law (Articles 6(2) and 6(3) of the Habitats Directive and Article 4(4) of the Birds Directive, by virtue of Article 7 of the Habitats Directive) and the agreement reached under the EU pilot.

The need to halt the bark beetle outbreak – which supposedly justifies the increased logging - ignores the fact that such outbreaks are natural processes that occur every 8-10 years. They are natural factors which shape changes in forest composition in the era of rapid climate change. Notably, given the fact that one-third of Białowieża Forest is excluded from logging (strict protection), it is impossible to achieve the threshold of 80% efficiency in logging of infested trees, which would be required to control the outbreak.

The increase in timber extraction was criticised by the most important scientific bodies and institutions responsible for nature protection in Poland and abroad. Also the public strongly opposes large-scale cutting of trees in Białowieża. More than 140,000 Poles signed an appeal¹ for protection of this site.

On 19 April 2016, seven Polish and international NGOs submitted a legal complaint² to the European Commission to highlight and provide in-depth evidence of the breaches of EU law.

On 24 May 2016, the Polish Ministry of Environment³ announced the start of logging that day. We urge the European Commission to fast-track formal infringement procedure and to shorten the timelines for the investigation. We further ask the Commission to impose interim measures to stop the logging.



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More information: www.ilovebialowieza.com

¹ <http://kochampuszcze.pl/>

² Complaint to the European Commission concerning alleged breach of Union law:

<http://www.documents.clientearth.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2016-04-19-complaint-to-the-european-commission-concerning-alleged-breach-of-union-law-over-logging-bialowieza-coll-en.pdf>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBlyZHBX5zw>