- **Collected for the use of EUFORE project (ID: 101081788) -**

A short summary of how the partnerships in European research and innovation (R&I) policy making have evolved and how the new partnerships under Horizon Europe are selected and prepared

A special focus on the planned Co-funded European Partnership on Forests and Forestry

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Towards a European Research Area

The policy objectives that underpin the European Research Area Network (ERA-NET) and related schemes were articulated in the European Commission Communication entitled 'Towards a European Research Area'. [i] ERA is described as "a vision for the future of research in Europe, an internal market for science and technology. It fosters scientific excellence, competitiveness and innovation through the promotion of better co-operation and co-ordination between relevant actors at all levels." [ii] ERA was conceived in 2000 and the core message of the ERA was, and still today is, the need **to overcome fragmentation of research efforts in the EU through better coordination and cooperation**. The starting point was competition with the USA and Japan: in terms of research and development (R&D) intensity, EU companies lag behind US and Japanese companies. [iii]

Now, in European research and innovation (R&I) policy making, the concept of 'partnerships' has been used since the 6th EU Research Framework Programme (FP6; launched in 2002). Under the FP6 one of the partnership forms introduced was the **ERA-NET instrument, to allow coordination and cooperation of national and regional research programmes** (Public-to-Public partnerships, P2Ps). T**he participants in these actions were** either programme 'owners' (**typically ministrie**s or regional authorities defining research programmes) **or** programme 'managers' (such as **research councils or other research funding agencies managing research programmes**). [iv] This new instrument was also the starting point for the European-wide ERA-NET collaboration in the forest-based sector with an official start date of 1 January 2004: WoodWisdom-Net[v] (18 partners from 8 countries).

Besides the public-to-public partnerships, in the context of the development of European Research Area policy in 2003 EU **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** in research were set up with two main objectives: 1) to address the fragmentation of research efforts between the private and public sector and across borders, 2) to increase public and private investment in research activities to reach the target of 3 % of EU gross domestic product. [vi] The first PPPs – the **European Technology Platforms** [vii] (ETPs) and the **Joint Technology Initiatives** (JTIs) – were developed to achieve these objectives. As the process to establish ETPs was bottom-up, flexible and industry-led, 25 ETPs were established in the first two years on various topics (from nanomedicine to road transport), one of the topics on forestry: **the Forest-based Sector Technology Platform (FTP) was established in 2005**.

Another example of the Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) is the **Bio-based Industries Consortium (BIC)**[viii] which is a non-profit organisation set up in Brussels in 2013 to represent the private sector in a PPP with the European Commission, **focused on strengthening the bio-based industries sector in Europe**. From 2014-2020 (under Horizon 2020), BIC's partnership with the European Commission was known as the **Bio-based Industries Joint Undertaking (BBI JU)**. Today, from 2021-2030, the new partnership is called the **Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking (CBE JU)**, which aims to build on the success of the BBI JU and address current challenges facing the industry.

Objectives and evolution of the ERA-NET instrument in FP6, FP7 and H2020

As described above, under the FP6 (for the years 2002-2006) one of the partnership forms introduced was the ERA-NET instrument, first as **ERA-NET Coordination and Support Actions** (ERA-NET CSA). Initially, the purpose of the instrument was to support the establishment of networks and the instrument was created to provide support for the transnational networking and coordination of research programmes and to encourage the creation of close, long-term links between national research programmes with shared goals. [ix]

Under the 7th Framework Programme (FP7, 2007-2013) the Commission decided to go one step further and introduced **ERA-NET Plus actions**. The focus of EU funding shifted from funding networks to funding transnational research projects resulting from joint calls since the Commission came to the conclusion that the harmonisation of national programmes and prevention of duplication of efforts were not sufficiently tackled. Now, the objective was to provide a specific EU financial contribution to the joint call for proposals (co-funding) and thus to encourage the pooling of resources of national funding bodies. By co-funding the joint call the Commission became a funding partner within the network with the right to have a say on the thematic content of the joint call, eligibility criteria and management procedures.

Based on the analysis of the previous experience, the Horizon 2020 programme (H2020, 2014-2020) proposed a new public-public support tool — **ERA-NET Cofund**. The ERA-NET Cofund instrument was a merger of the former ERA-NET and ERA-NET Plus instruments. ERA-NET Cofunds were to build lasting collaboration among Member States and their research funding organisations, also drawing on existing, long-standing partnerships that had been enabled in the ERA-NET scheme in the past ten years. The central and compulsory element of ERA-NET Cofund was still the implementation of one joint call with top-up funding from the Commission. However, in addition to the co-funded call, the consortia could (but were not obliged to) implement other joint activities (as in the classical ERA-NET) including other joint calls without EU co-funding.

The ultimate idea behind the ERA-NET scheme was eventually to come up with self-sustained networks (no EU funding, all activities based on funding from participating research funding organisations). Although some networks did manage to become self-sustained networks (see e.g. ERA-NET Bioenergy[x], organised on a membership basis), for most networks it became obvious that without any financial EU support for transnational research programme cooperation, many countries could not participate in such network activities and it would have been the larger countries with more research resources that would have dominated.

This has also been the situation for the Member States and their research funding organisations participating in the ERA-Nets in the forest-based sector. Therefore, until today the network (today running as an ERA-NET Cofund Action ForestValue[xi] until March 2023) has continued running under the ERA-NET instrument. Specifically for the European forest-based sector, which is largely composed of SMEs, the ERA-NET scheme has proven to be the essential backbone for research and development activities. [xii]

European Partnerships in Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation (2021-2027), succeeding Horizon 2020 (2014 to 2020). [xiii] Compared to Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe introduces some new elements, one of them being a new generation of objective-driven and more ambitious partnerships in support of agreed EU policy objectives. In brief, **European Partnerships are are initiatives in which the EU Commission and public and/or private partners commit themselves to jointly support the development and implementation of a research and innovation programme**. Eventually, it comes to the pooling of resources i.e. co-funding, aligning of priorities and programming of activities. [xiv]

Horizon Europe distinguishes between 3 types of European Partnerships: i) **Co-funded** partnerships involving public authorities ((previously featured as ERA-NETs, EJP, FET Flagships in H2020), ii) **Co-programmed** partnerships between the Commission and private and/or public partners (having evolved from the contractual Public Private Partnerships, cPPPs in H2020), and iii) **Institutionalised** partnerships (based on Article 187 or Article 185 TFEU). [xv]

Now, when the collaboration between the European research funding organisations to support the forest-based sector has based on different ERA-NET Actions since 2004 and it has turned out to be a successful way to reduce fragmentation to support the realisation of the European Research Area (ERA), in 2019 the Member States and their research funding organisations decided to propose a co-funded European partnership on forestry to further strengthen the cooperation between national/ regional public organizations, and to continue organising joint calls for R&I proposals as well as to implement joint activities.

Strategic Planning of Horizon Europe and European Partnership Process

Horizon Europe introduces a more strategic and impact-driven approach to partnerships. It sets out common life-cycle criteria for all partnerships with the focus on the effectiveness in achieving agreed Union priorities, as well as openness, coherence and synergies with other relevant Union initiatives (including missions). Horizon Europe introduces a systemic process for selecting, implementing and monitoring for all partnerships, linking them with the Strategic Planning of Horizon Europe. [xvi]

The Strategic Plan[xvii] sets out the policy priorities for Horizon Europe, as well as expected impacts. It is the basis for the work programme covering Pillar II of Horizon Europe (Global challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness) and its call topics. The first Strategic Plan covers the period of 2021-2024 and the second one the years 2025-2027. The Strategic Plan contains several elements, one of them being identification of co-programmed and co-funded European partnerships (note: any new Partnerships can start in 2025 at earliest).

The strategic coordinating process is implemented with a number of elements and at the core is a **Partnership Knowledge Hub**[xviii] (**PKH**; Lead DG: DG Research and Innovation) that allows working-level interactions and meetings between the Commission, EU countries and associated countries of Horizon Europe, as well as partnership representatives. Through the PKH, the Commission also wants to engage in strategic discussions on key policy issues to ensure strategic steering and political guidance on the policy approach and progress of the European Partnerships. From 2023 onwards, If and when deemed relevant by the PKH, the outcome of these discussions will also be channelled to the **ERA Forum**[xix] for a further discussion between the Commission and EU countries from the perspective of coordination and implementation of the ERA objectives, particularly in implementing the ERA Policy Agenda. [xx]

Forest Partnership and Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR)

The Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR[xxi]) was established in 1974 and it is formed by representatives of 37 countries. It became a source of advice on European agricultural and wider bioeconomy research, and a catalyst for the coordination of national research programmes. As SCAR announces, since the introduction of the Green Deal, SCAR has become an even more important collaboration platform for the European Commission (EC), EU Member States and Associated Countries to discuss on R&I priorities to address Europe's challenges in agriculture, fisheries, food systems, forestry, and the wider bioeconomy, thus strengthening the European Research Area. Among other things, SCAR with its dedicated Working Groups is a key platform for co-creating five Horizon Europe Partnerships.

The established structures of the SCAR organisation is the main reason why the SCAR Strategic Working Group on Forests and Forestry Research and Innovation (SCAR FOREST) is selected as the main group for

collaboration for the European Commission when it comes to the development of a possible European partnership on forestry.

European Partnerships – Preparatory process

1. Partnership fiche

After the candidates for European Partnerships have been identified as part of the strategic planning, the first step in the preparatory process for any new candidate is to collect a partnership fiche that builds the basis for the next steps of preparation, and the structured consultation of Member States. The fiche is a 4-page summary document based on a template provided by EC, and it is prepared in collaboration with the Member States and EC. The fiche also shows which EC Services are directly involved in the partnership, one of the Directorates-General (DGs) having a lead role (for the planned Co-funded European Partnership on Forests and Forestry it is DG AGRI, other services included are DG RTD, DG ENV, DG GROW, DG CLIMA, DG JRC). While DGs are responsible for different policy areas, they need to run an internal consultation process to agree on the COM perspective for the partnership.

EC expects that all fiches should be ready for each candidate partnership in June 2023 (approved by the Programme Committee[xxii], published on the web) for the next Horizon Europe strategic planning period (2025-2027), until then the consultation process will remain open.

Besides the individual partnership discussions taking place, on 1 December 2022 EC launched a public consultation[xxiii] on the past, present and future of the EU's Horizon research and innovation programmes 2014-2027. With this consultation, the Commission is collecting input, for example, for the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-2027. The public consultation allows participants, for example, to identify future priorities for Horizon Europe's Strategic Plan 2025-2027, providing inputs on emerging research and innovation needs, on synergies across EU programmes, etc. The consultation will close in February 2023.

2. Long version of partnership description

After the Programme Committee has approved the candidate partnerships in June 2023, the candidates will be asked to further develop their ideas together with partners (Member States), this long version (30-60 pages) of a partnership description is based on common guidance/template[xxiv] provided by EC. To facilitate an effective and efficient development process for this, SCAR FOREST has decided that they will nominate a core writing group for this (this has been a normal procedure for the other partnerships, too).

This process will start after June 2023 and should be finished during the autumn 2023.

3. In parallel: further work of the partners to prepare the programme and develop the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA)/ roadmap

As described above, there are various expectations towards the European Partnerships, and a key element for meeting these various expectations is through the development of a **Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda** (SRIA). SRIA **is a precondition to launch a European Partnership and needs to be agreed with the EC.** SRIA has to be prepared in parallel to other work required by the strategic coordination.

Hence the R&I agenda setting – among other things - requires an extensive stakeholder consultation process, **EUFORE project was established to focus on this part of the process to support SCAR FOREST** when they

are dealing with the requirements coming from the strategic coordinating process and discussing respective issues with EC.

4. Strategic Plan, includes the Partnership in the list of co-programmed/co-funded European Partnerships

No precise schedule announced but since the second Horizon Europe Strategic Plan will be for the period of 2025-2027, the Plan should get published sometime in 2024 at latest.

5. [Agreement on budgetary provisions for the partnerships in the portfolio]

The initial national contributions earmarked by Member States and Associated Countries for partnerships play a vital role. For Co-funded European Partnerships EC is co-funding these partnerships and the EU contribution is calculated against the national funding contributions/commitments.

6. Call topic for the respective work programme Horizon Europe is prepared and discussed with the Programme Committee[xxv]

At this stage, the call topics of any new partnerships will be prepared for the respective work programmes for the years 2025-26. It is expected that the first drafts could be available early 2024.

7. Adoption of the work programme (comitology) and publication of the call

After the work programmes have been discussed, and approved by the respective programme committees, the calls for proposals will be published in the Funding & Tenders Portal[xxvi]. Any calls for a partnership will be single-stage calls, and based on the recently launched calls[xxvii], any such call could be opened in 22 December 2024 at very earliest, then possibly with a submission deadline of 12 April 2025, thus giving to a consortium with around 3.5 months to collect the proposal.

8. Submission of a proposal for a co-fund action, evaluation, Grant Agreement preparation

A proposal for a co-funded partnership follows the standard application procedure of any proposal submitted under Horizon Europe via the Funding & Tenders Portal. For example, the consortium structure is similar to any other proposal and one of the participating organisations needs to have the mandate of all participants to act as a coordinator and to submit the application.

Only exception for the application is that for Cofund calls, project participants must add the 1st annual work programme document[xxviii] (work plan) to the application and upload it as separate annex to proposal part B in the Submission System. The 1st work programme is a key part of the proposal; the work programmes for subsequent years are regular deliverables for the implementation of the project. They provide a detailed description of activities for the initial and each successive twelve-month period of the project, as the action develops in line with the objectives and description of work provided in part B of the proposal. **These annual programmes (work plans) are through which SRIA and the included R&I priorities are being implemented.**

9. Launch of the European Partnership, preparation and launch of activities

As for any single-stage call in Horizon Europe, information on the outcome of the evaluation can be expected around 5 months from the deadline for submission and the indicative date for the signing of grant agreements is around 8 months from the deadline for submission. Thus, **if a proposal for a co-funded partnership would be submitted in April 2025 and it would get approved for funding, the partnership could be expected to start in December 2025.** This is when the first activities could be launched, including e.g. calls for proposals, and knowing that it will take quite some time to have all preparations completed to get a call launched, any joint call could possibly be launched in the second half of 2026 at earliest. After the selection procedure, the first projects resulting from the joint call could thus get started late 2026 at very earliest, but more likely early 2027.

Any co-funded partnership typically has a duration of 5-7 years.

ENDNOTES

[i] COM(2000) 6 Final, available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2000:0006:FIN:EN:PDF.

[ii] Memo 27 June 2002, The 6th EU Research Framework Programme, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_02_152.

[iii] JRC Working Papers on Corporate R&D and Innovation No 02/2020, available at https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/jrc120008.pdf.

[iv] For examples of the latest programme 'owners' and programme 'managers' participating in a forest sector ERA-Net, please see https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/773324 (ForestValue, 10/2017-03/2023)

[v] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/510206

[vi] Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service: Public-private partnerships in research, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603934/EPRS_BRI%282017%29603934_EN.pdf

[vii] Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service: At a glance - European Technology Platforms May 2017, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/603935/EPRS_ATA(2017)603935_EN.pdf

[viii] https://biconsortium.eu/about

[ix] RTD-PUBLICATIONS 2016: Analysis of ERA-NET Cofund actions under Horizon 2020. Final report of the expert group, available at https://era.gv.at/public/documents/3030/KI-01-16-995-EN-N.pdf

[x] https://eranetbioenergy.net/

[xi] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/773324

[xii] Kleinschmit von Lengefeld, Andreas & Kies, Uwe, 2018. Assessment of ERA-Nets and COST actions in the EU forest-based sector. SCAR CASA Study for SWG Forest. FCBA Institut Technologique & InnovaWood, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325398922_Assessment_of_ERA-NETs_and_COST_Actions_in_the_EU_forest-based_sector_SCAR_CASA_Study_for_SWG_Forest

[xiii] How Horizon Europe was developed.

[xiv] A thorough and detailed explanation of European Partnerships available at the ERA-LEARN website at https://www.era-learn.eu/partnerships-in-a-nutshell/european-partnerships

[xv] For the current portfolio of European Partnerships, please see https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/european-partnerships-horizon-europe_en

[xvi] https://www.era-learn.eu/partnerships-in-a-nutshell/european-partnerships/european-partnership-process-2013-strategic-coordinating-process

[xvii] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/strategic-plan_en

[xviii] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupID=3783

[xix] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupID=3833

[xx] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/european-partnerships-horizon-europe_en#strategic-coordinating-process

[xxi] https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/organisation/scar-standing-commitee-agricultural-research_en

[xxii] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/comitology-register/screen/committees/C70401/consult?lang=en

[xxiii] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/now-open-largest-public-consultation-ever-held-past-present-and-future-european-research-and-2022-12-01_en

[xxiv] https://www.era-learn.eu/documents/partnership_draft_guidance.pdf

[xxv] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/comitology-register/screen/committees/C70410/consult?lang=en

[xxvi] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home

[xxvii] See for example HORIZON-CL6-2023-FARM2FORK-01-9: European partnership on sustainable food systems for people, planet and climate: Opening date 22 December 2022, Deadline date 12 April 2023. https://bit.ly/3PC2xPl

[xxviii] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/temp-form/af/annual-work-programme_he-cofund_en.docx