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Commission complaint lodged as Polish minister illegally approves logging in Białowieża Forest

The European Commission has been called on to investigate an illegal plan to log Poland's Białowieża Forest. Seven Polish and international NGOs today complained to the European Commission, after permission to triple logging in the UNESCO heritage forest was given by Polish Environment Minister Jan Szyszko. ClientEarth lawyers said Szyszko's decision breached Article 6 of the Habitats Directive. This could result in the Polish government being taken to the European Court of Justice, and hefty fines.

ClientEarth lawyer and author of the complaint, Agata Szafraniuk, said: *"The whole forest is protected by Natura 2000, which defends Europe's most vulnerable species and habitats. We told the Minister his action was illegal, but he didn't listen. We cannot challenge this decision under Polish law, so complaining to the Commission is our last resort. In the past, breaches of EU nature law have led to hefty fines and withdrawal of funding. We hope the Minister will reconsider before this irreplaceable forest is lost forever."*

Dariusz Gatkowski, WWF Polska, signatory of the complaint: *"The story begins with "once again". In 2008 the European Commission launched a procedure of a structured dialogue (EU Pilot) with Poland due to intensive wood extraction in the Białowieża Forest. Negotiations brought a compromise – the logging limit was lowered and set at the level of wood needed to fulfill local community demand. In 2013, the Commission closed the structured dialogue. Significant increase of wood extraction, accepted in March 2016 by the Ministry of Environment, breaches the agreement with the EC and EU law. We urge the Commission to enforce the resumption of the compromise set in 2012."*

Przemysław Chylarecki, phd, Greenmind, signatory of the complaint: *"Contrary to what the Minister of Environment says, the bark beetle outbreak does not pose any threat to the habitats protected by the EU Habitat Directive. In Białowieża's oak-hornbeam forests it may even improve their state. What is important, the intensive wood extraction is a threat for priority habitats and species, for which this Natura 2000 site was designed."*

Dawid Kaźmierczak, Dzika Polska, signatory of the complaint: *"The field research we conducted in the Białowieża Forest shows clearly that the spruce tree recovers on its own very well in those parts of the forest that have not been converted to forest plantations."*

Robert Cyglicki, Greenpeace Poland, signatory of the complaint: *"We've done all in our power to save Białowieża Forest in Poland, without calling forth foreign institutions. We've appealed, sent letters, asked for meetings and protested. Also scientists and lawyers gave*

their statements, as well as over 140 000 Poles who signed a petition to Prime Minister Szydło to stop Minister Szyszko. Nothing worked. That is the reason why today we reach for EU law.”

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