



PRESS RELEASE

19 September 2024

Public thematic report

THE NATIONAL FOREST OFFICE AND THE CHALLENGE OF ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Established in 1964, the National Forest Office (*Office National des Forêts*, ONF) is an industrial and commercial public agency (EPIC) responsible for the sustainable management of public forests. In mainland France, the ONF manages approximately 1.7 million hectares of State-owned forests and 2.9 million hectares belonging to other public forest owners, including local authorities. The principles governing the management of these forests have been defined in the Forest Code since 1827, known as the “forestry regime”. With a budget exceeding €900 million and a workforce of 8,043 staff as of the end of 2023, the ONF oversees 25 % of the forested area in mainland France and markets 40 % of the timber produced in the country. The ONF also undertakes public-interest missions on behalf of the State, such as initiatives aimed at biodiversity conservation. Its EPIC status enables it to operate in competitive markets by offering services such as forestry works, consultancy, and project management.

Fragile public forests at the centre of ecological transition challenges

Droughts and pest infestations are causing large-scale forest dieback. Between 2018 and 2021, 25,000 hectares of state-owned forests, along with an equivalent area of community forests, were destroyed, necessitating reforestation efforts supported by the State. Additionally, climate change is slowing the growth of forest stands and reducing the biological productivity of French public forests. This vulnerability has highlighted the importance of the environmental services provided by forests, including biodiversity conservation and carbon storage. The ONF must now fully incorporate these aspects into its management practices.

An improving financial position

Revenue from the sale of state-owned timber accounts for 40 % of the ONF's turnover. This revenue has increased due to the rise in timber prices observed in 2022 and 2023, contributing to a reduction in the organisation's indebtedness to €271.3 million at the end of 2023, down from a peak of nearly €400 million in 2020 and 2021. This positive trend is also the result of State support in covering the costs associated with implementing the forest regime in other public forests and the ONF's public-interest missions. However, as the financing of these missions only reached a sustainable balance in 2023, the ONF must continue its efforts to stabilise their costs further. To ensure its commercial operations remain profitable, the ONF has raised the prices of its services, improved its analytical management tools, and reduced its wage bill.

Fragile sustainability

Despite recent improvements, the financial sustainability of the ONF remains fragile. To cushion the impact of price fluctuations, the State, the ONF, and FNCOFOR have agreed on the goal of expanding supply contracts. However, achieving this objective requires the ONF to closely monitor both the prices of the timber it sells and its production costs. The expansion of the forestry regime also demands significant resources, with the ONF estimating the need for 70 additional employees and €7 million for every 100,000 hectares added. Given the reluctance of public forest owners to increase their contributions to the funding of the forestry regime, the fulfilment of this goal will *ultimately* depend on even greater financial support from the State. Clarifying the eligibility criteria for the forest regime is therefore desirable, along with an assessment of the financial implications of the decisions made. Finally, the gradual reduction in ONF staff has significantly impacted the organisation's ability to meet its objectives. However, the precise number of staff required for the ONF's missions, as well as their distribution by status, is not currently well-documented and needs to be addressed.

A foreseeable increase in State support in the absence of new sources of funding

The ongoing shift in the ONF's missions challenges the long-standing principle that "*the forest pays for itself through timber sales.*" By 2050, the ONF estimates that the annual replanting effort for declining State-owned forests will need to reach 21,000 hectares, compared to the current 12,000 hectares. The cost of reforestation is projected to rise to between €100 million and €120 million per year for State-owned forests alone, up from the current €44.2 million. The financial effort required for other public forests is estimated at €120 million annually, which will fall to their owners, with support from the State. Given its financial limitations and without new sources of funding, the ONF will not be able to meet the ecological transition challenges—particularly those related to climate change—on its own. In this context, the Court of Accounts recommends prioritising the objectives assigned to the ONF and adjusting its human and financial resources to ensure it can fulfil them.

[Read the report](#)

PRESS CONTACTS

Julie Poissier ■ Communications Director ■ T +33 (0)6 87 36 52 21 ■ julie.poissier@ccomptes.fr

Sarah Gay ■ Press Relations Officer ■ T +33 (0)6 50 86 91 83 ■ sarah.gay@ccomptes.fr



3^e CAMPAGNE de participation citoyenne

de la Cour et des chambres régionales et territoriales des comptes
du 2 septembre au 4 octobre 2024

DÉJÀ 6 RAPPORTS D'INITIATIVE CITOYENNE
PUBLIÉS ET 28 EN COURS



Plateforme citoyenne
de la Cour et des chambres
régionales et territoriales des comptes

