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ФАКУЛТЕТ ПО ГОРСКО СТОПАНСТВО
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OPINION

on a dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.7 Administration and management, scientific speciality Economics and Management (Forestry and Forest Industry)

Author of dissertation: Eng. Stefan Petrov Bechev, Doctoral student (full-time) at the Department "Forest Management" at the University of Forestry (UF), Sofia, Bulgaria.

Dissertation Topic: Study on the Management of Municipal Forest Areas in Bulgaria

Reviewer: Assoc.Prof.Dr. Mariya Marinova Peneva, UNWE, Department of Natural Resources Economics, 3.8. Economics, "Economics and Management (Agricultural Economics and Policy)", appointed as a member of the scientific jury by Order No. ЗПС-668 / 24.11.2025 of the Rector of the UF.

1. Relevance of the problem.

The dissertation addresses a timely and significant scientific and practical problem related to the management of municipal forest territories in Bulgaria. In the context of accelerating climate change, rising societal expectations for forest ecosystem services, and growing pressure on public resources, the role of municipal forests is expanding and holds strategic importance for both local development and national policy. Municipalities are the largest non-state owners of forest territories in the country, and, at this level of governance, the economic, social, and environmental interests intersect, often under conditions of limited administrative and expert capacity. The relevance of the research is further reinforced by the fact that the management of municipal forests has traditionally remained at the periphery of scientific interest. The PhD student identifies precisely the lack of a systematic assessment of the sustainability of municipal forest management, based on established criteria and indicators, as a significant and still underdeveloped problem. The issue is also relevant from a governance perspective. Municipal forests represent a key resource, and the absence of reliable tools for assessing and monitoring their management creates a risk of inefficient use and long-term environmental damage. In this context, the dissertation is timely and fully aligned with contemporary priorities in natural resource management.

2. Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and creative interpretation of the literature review.

The literature review in the dissertation demonstrates a solid knowledge of the theoretical and methodological foundations of sustainable forest management. The PhD candidate systematically traces the development of the concept of sustainable development and its application in the forestry sector, integrating information from international, European, and national sources. Key international processes and initiatives related to the development of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management are presented, including the pan-European process. The critical analysis demonstrates the ability to interpret scientific and policy documents and to relate theoretical frameworks to the Bulgarian context and the specific characteristics of municipal forest territories. The literature review is well structured and covers a wide range of sources.

3. Aim, objectives, hypotheses and research methods. Relevance of the chosen research methodology to the stated aim and objectives of the dissertation.

The objective of the dissertation is clearly formulated and logically justified: to assess the management of municipal forest territories in Bulgaria and to propose recommendations for their improvement. The research hypothesis is clearly defined and emphasises the importance of a scientifically grounded system

of criteria and indicators as a prerequisite for improving management practices. The research tasks are logically structured and consistently lead to the achievement of the stated objective. They encompass theoretical, empirical, and applied aspects, ensuring a comprehensive and systematic approach to the research problem. The methodological framework is built on established scientific approaches adapted to the specific characteristics of the research object. The research methods employed align with the defined objectives and tasks. Particular attention should be paid to the use of normalised scoring as a tool for assessing sustainable management, which enables comparative analysis and synthesis of results.

4. Visualization and presentation of the results.

The results obtained in the dissertation are presented clearly, systematically, and with a high degree of visualisation. This facilitates data interpretation and supports the analytical process.

5. Discussion of results and literature used.

The discussion of results demonstrates the PhD student's ability to reflect critically on empirical data within the context of existing scientific research. The PhD candidate consistently compares the obtained results with theoretical frameworks and practices described in the literature, which enables an assessment of their significance and validity. The analysis goes beyond descriptive findings, seeking causal relationships and explanations for the observed differences in the management of municipal forests. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the sustainability of management practices.

The literature used is diverse, and the referencing is accurate, which attests to a strong level of academic rigour.

6. Contributions of the thesis.

In my view, the conducted research enables the identification and differentiation of the following scientific and practical contributions to the sustainable management of municipal forest territories.

Scientific contributions

An essential scientific contribution of the dissertation is the systematisation and critical interpretation of international and European concepts of sustainable forest management, with a focus on their applicability to municipal forest ownership in Bulgaria.

Another contribution lies in adapting the pan-European system of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management to the specific characteristics of municipal forest territories in Bulgaria. The author distinguishes the need for a particular analytical approach and proposes a framework for interpreting indicators at the municipal governance level that adequately reflects institutional and socio-economic characteristics.

An essential scientific contribution is the development and application of a model for assessing the sustainable management of municipal forest territories using normalised scoring, which enables a comprehensive and comparative analysis of various aspects of sustainability.

Last but not least in importance, a scientific contribution is the empirical demonstration of differences in the degree of sustainability of municipal forest management resulting from historical, institutional, and governance-related factors. This expands scientific knowledge regarding the role of local governance in the sustainable development of forest territories.

Scientific and applied contributions

The main scientific and practical contribution of the dissertation is the application of the developed methodology to assess the management of municipal forest territories, thereby demonstrating its potential for use by municipal administrations and state institutions.

From a practical perspective, identifying specific weaknesses in the management of municipal forests in Bulgaria, based on empirical data and analysis, is also important. These results have direct value for improving management practices, planning, and control over the use of forest resources.

Another scientific and applied contribution is the potential to use the developed approach as a basis for

future assessments and comparative analyses, both across municipalities and between different forms of forest ownership.
A further important scientific and applied contribution is the formulation of practical recommendations to improve the sustainability of municipal forest management.

7. Assessment of the extent of the dissertator's personal involvement in the contributions.

Based on the presented work, it is clear that the doctoral candidate plays a leading and independent role at all stages of this study.

8. Critical comments and questions.

My critical remark is, rather, a recommendation that outlines directions for future research: a more apparent distinction between results and interpretations in the analysis and an expansion of the discussion of the applicability of the methodology to other types of forest ownership. I would also like to put one discussion-oriented question. The developed methodology for assessing the sustainable management of municipal forest territories is applied within the constraints of municipalities' existing institutional and administrative capacity. In this regard, to what extent are the obtained results comparable among municipalities with different resources, management practices, and levels of expert capacity, and what are the possible limitations of the methodology in this respect?

9. Assessment of the publications on the dissertation. Reflections in science - use and citation by other authors.

The PhD candidate presents three publications related to the dissertation topic, reflecting its main components. They were published in the period 2021–2023 and meet both the quantitative and qualitative requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor."

The presented abstract accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation.

CONCLUSION:

On the basis of the different research methods learned and applied by the PhD student, the correctly derived experiments, the generalisations and conclusions, I consider that the presented dissertation meets the requirements of the FRAADB and the Regulations of the University of Forestry for its application, which gives me the reason to evaluate it as **POSITIVE**.

I take the liberty of suggesting that the Honourable Scientific Jury also vote in the affirmative/negative and award the Eng. Stefan Petrov Bechev the educational and scientific degree ***"Doctor"*** in the scientific speciality.

Date: 06 January 2026
Sofia

PREPARED THE OPINION: .....
(Assoc.Prof.Dr. Mariya Peneva)