



COMMITTEE ON FORESTRY

TWENTY-FOURTH SESSION

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ENHANCING WORK ON BOREAL AND TEMPERATE FORESTS

Note by the Secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In 2014, the FAO Committee on Forestry (COFO) requested FAO to “scale up its support to countries on boreal forests, (...) address the specificities of boreal forests in the normative and field work of FAO, especially those related to forest protection, forest fires, wildlife management and carbon monitoring; continue exploring further possibilities for enhancing interdisciplinary work on boreal forests”.¹ In 2016, this COFO mandate was extended to also include temperate forests. The 23rd Session of COFO specifically requested FAO to: “strengthen its work in the area of boreal and temperate forests, taking into account their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including combating climate change and enhancing food security and nutrition” and to “explore further options in this regard, such as, *inter alia*, participation in existing initiatives, bodies and processes and the establishment of a dedicated working group of COFO, and to present a detailed document with concrete proposals on that issue to its next session in 2018 under a separate agenda item”.² When considering the outcomes of the 23rd Session of COFO the 40th FAO Conference in 2017 “requested FAO to strengthen its work in the area of boreal and temperate forests, taking into account their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including combating climate change and enhancing food security and nutrition”.³

2. In response to the requests, FAO prepared a detailed document on the significance, challenges and opportunities of boreal forests, existing initiatives and potential for strengthening FAO’s work⁴, which was discussed at the 39th Session of the European Forestry Commission and at the 29th Session of the North American Forest Commission in 2017.

¹ Report of the 22nd Session of COFO (23-27 June 2014), COFO/2014/REP, paragraphs 97-99.

² Report of the 23rd Session of COFO (18-22 July 2016), COFO/2016/REP, paragraphs 14(c) and 34.

³ Report of the 40th Session of the FAO Conference (3-8 July 2017), C 2017/paragraph 49.

⁴ Strengthening FAO’s work on boreal and temperate forests, FO:EFC/2017/17.

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3. The European Forestry Commission⁵ noted that, with regard to the geographic scope, “the prevailing difference between boreal and temperate forests does not justify a unified approach to these two biomes, while separate, more focused efforts on boreal and temperate domains would be more likely to yield the intended impacts”. The Commission recommended FAO “to consider a more active cooperation with the existing mechanisms instead of creating any additional platform and encouraged these mechanisms to seek a stronger involvement from FAO and ECE as appropriate.” The Commission encouraged FAO to continue building up its operational and information support to member States.

4. The North American Forest Commission⁶ noted that much work is already being done by other entities on temperate forests and that FAO should focus on boreal forests when strengthening its work. The Commission also argued that FAO should work closely with other organizations and processes, including the Circumboreal Working Group, rather than establishing a new, formal open-ended working group under FAO which would require new resources or displace existing work.

5. Based on the feedback received by the Commissions, this paper focuses mainly on boreal forests and on opportunities for FAO to work with existing collaboration mechanisms.

II. EXISTING INITIATIVES AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCES

6. The document to the Regional Forestry Commissions provided an overview of existing institutional experiences. These differ and overlap in complex ways, e.g., with regards to issues, country participation, and level of engagement. Some are specifically dedicated to the biome (e.g., Circumboreal Working Group, International Boreal Forest Research Association), others are regionally focused (e.g., Barents Forest Sector Network of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Economic Commission for Europe, European Forest Institute, Forest Europe), yet others are global in coverage while addressing various issues that are pertinent to boreal forests (e.g., Convention on Biological Diversity, FAO, Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, International Union of Forest Research Organizations, Montreal Process, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN Forum on Forests).

7. FAO maintains active technical cooperation in the forest sector with all key boreal countries. Furthermore, FAO’s normative work on e.g. forest fires, forest health, pests and diseases and climate change is highly relevant to boreal forests. Examples include the guidelines on forest fires, phytosanitary measures and climate change for policy makers, global review of forest pests and diseases, forestry for a low-carbon future, and socioeconomic surveys in forestry. FAO together with partner organizations launched the Sustainable Wood for a Sustainable World (SW4SW) initiative⁷, which will be of major relevance to the countries with boreal and temperate forests.

8. Boreal forests are highly relevant for the European Forestry Commission (EFC) and the North American Forest Commission (NAFC). The Advisory Committee on Sustainable Forest-based Industries (ACSFI) is FAO’s statutory body involving regional and national industry associations that represent private sector perspectives, with the bio-economy being a major item on their shared agenda.

9. The member countries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which also include Canada and USA, encompass the bulk of the world’s temperate and boreal forests. The Integrated Programme of Work of the FAO European Forestry Commission and UNECE Committee of Forestry and the Forest Industry (COFFI) includes joint activities on forest products markets, wood energy, and forest resources (including inventory, sustainable forest management

⁵ Report of the joint session of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry and the European Forestry Commission, FO:EFC/2017/2, paragraphs 79-83.

⁶ Report of the 29th Session of the North American Forest Commission, FO:NAFC/2017/REP, paragraphs 135 - 137

⁷ www.fao.org/forestry/sustainable-wood/en/

criteria and indicators), all of which have direct relevance to the boreal forest issues. Other relevant regional and interregional mechanisms and organizations include, among others, Forest Europe, The Montréal Process and the European Forest Institute.

10. There are also a number of institutional mechanisms focusing on boreal environments, including forests. The International Boreal Forest Research Association (IBFRA) links forest researchers from the boreal forest countries and has a mandate to (1) coordinate fundamental and applied research, (2) increase understanding of the boreal forest, and (3) disseminate research results. IBFRA is focused primarily on ecological research and in particular on the impacts of climate change and mitigation and adaptation strategies. IBFRA will be hosting an international conference on “Cool Forests at Risk?” in September 2018. The Barents Forest Sector Network (BFSN), one of the working groups of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), aims to create the necessary conditions for the development of forestry, environmental values, and wood-based industries through cooperation, mutual concrete actions, projects and programmes within the forest sector of the Barents Region.

11. The Circumboreal Working Group of the six circumboreal countries (Canada, Finland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States) aims to strengthen cooperation on boreal forests, particularly around two themes: boreal forests and the bio-economy (socio-economic dimension), and resilience and vulnerability of boreal forest ecosystems to climate change (natural science dimension). The Working Group is organizing a “Boreal Ministerial Summit” in Sweden in June 2018 in order to further promote cooperation and to support an integrated approach towards sustainable forest management and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). FAO has been consulted in the preparations for the summit and is invited to attend and present its work and priorities with relevance to forests and forestry in the circumboreal region. A ministerial declaration is being prepared reaffirming the countries’ commitment to the sustainable management of boreal forests, especially in view of a changing climate.

III. OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING FAO'S WORK ON BOREAL FORESTS

12. As mentioned earlier, much of FAO’s existing work on forests is relevant for boreal forests and can be strengthened by putting more emphasis on the boreal forest biome, for example when developing, testing and promoting the application of guidelines or new methodologies. A few examples of such opportunities are provided below.

13. Boreal forests are particularly vulnerable to climate change as temperature increases in high latitudes are predicted to be higher than global average increases and ecosystem development and recovery in boreal forests is typically a slow process. FAO is preparing a framework methodology for climate change vulnerability assessments of forests and forest dependent people to assist countries in their adaptation planning. This methodology will be highly relevant for boreal forests and should be tested in and applied by boreal forest countries.

14. Boreal forests are vulnerable to carbon losses from natural disturbances such as wildfire, insects, droughts, wind throw and flooding. The impact of climate change on boreal forests has the potential to alter tree growth and mortality rates, to increase the risk of disturbances such as fires and pests, and to affect soils, peatlands and permafrost systems. Fire and pest management, linked to climate change but also to human interventions (direct human carelessness in the case of many fires, conversion of fragile forest land to urban use, replanting with ill-adapted species) present huge challenges which differ between countries.

15. On forest fire, FAO could be both a provider of reliable information and a neutral convener and disseminator of discussions, and bring together scientists and decision makers to consider and debate boreal forest fire management issues. Based on its history of partnership, engagement, communication and interaction FAO could analyze and monitor fire data and information to support policy decisions; assist in assessing the damage and loss from wildfires and help focus efforts and

resources on critical areas where intervention and investment are needed for risk reduction; raise awareness of the importance of wildfire management to the achievement of global objectives; and maintain and reinvigorate relationships with global networks (such as the Global Fire Monitoring Centre and Global Forest Watch) to undertake actions in support of improved boreal forest fire management.

16. On forest health, FAO is currently facilitating five regional invasive species networks (including one for Europe and Central Asia) to foster information exchange and resource mobilization; promote collaboration with existing international and regional organizations dealing with forest health; strengthen national capacities to manage forest pests, support projects, raise regional awareness, and act as a link between experts, institutions, networks and other stakeholders concerned with forest invasive species and forest health. In addition FAO closely works with North American Forest Commission's Insects, Diseases, and Invasive Plants Working Group. In the future, FAO could expand this work focusing on addressing challenges of boreal forests, e.g. preventive measures such as early detection and early action for major invasive pests; strengthening phytosanitary measures to address the introduction of new pests; developing methodologies to address information gaps and scientific uncertainties to better understand climate-induced pest outbreaks and forest dieback; and improving resilience of boreal forest ecosystem to pest outbreaks.

17. The SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests include important commitments by countries to manage their forests sustainably. In order to monitor and report on progress, timely and reliable data is required on the countries' forest resources. FAO's Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) is the most comprehensive source of forest data and includes information on forest area and forest area changes disaggregated by biome. It can therefore serve as a global repository for forest information on the boreal forest biome. The remote sensing technologies to be used for FRA 2020 have a large potential to improve data quality in vast boreal forest areas where ground-based surveys are difficult and costly.

18. FAO is currently strengthening its work on the contribution of forest products to the bio-economy through new initiative on "Sustainable Wood for a Sustainable World (SW4SW). The initiative will focus on strengthening the contributions of sustainable wood value chains to sustainable development and climate change mitigation, in collaboration with international partners. This includes awareness raising and advocacy of the benefits of sustainable wood products, building capacity for sustainable wood value chains in the context of the bio-economy and facilitating access to finance and markets. The initiative provides opportunities for boreal countries to strengthen the contribution of boreal forest products to the bio-economy.

19. In accordance with the recommendations by the EFC and the NAFC, FAO could work through a number of existing mechanisms by encouraging more focus on and attention to boreal forests. One key mechanism would be to strengthen the focus on boreal forests of the technical work carried out at FAO headquarters and by its regional offices in partnership with other organizations. One example of this is the Collaborative Forest Resources Questionnaire (CFRQ) of FRA. The Montréal Process Working Group on Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests, UNECE and the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe are all members of the CFRQ and data is shared among partners, thus helping to increase data consistency. FRA 2020 will further strengthen the CFRQ partnership through joint data collection for pan-European reporting on indicators of Sustainable Forest Management in collaboration with FOREST EUROPE and UNECE. These data will be collected through the new on-line FRA reporting platform. Furthermore, FAO has engaged in an innovative partnership with Google, to provide countries with access to a vast repository of geospatial data including freely available satellite imagery.

20. The NAFC has a number of very active Working Groups on issues such as silviculture, forest fire, pests and diseases, to name a few, and the 29th Session of the NAFC already recommended addressing boreal issues in these Working Groups. Similarly, a number of the existing thematic Teams

of Specialists (ToS) of the EFC and COFFI that support the implementation of the Integrated Programme of Work 2018-2021 could increase their focus on boreal forests. This may be particularly relevant for the ToS related to data, monitoring and assessment, green jobs in the forest sector and forest fires.

21. FAO is working with a number of regional and international research organizations related to forests and helps disseminate knowledge generated through research and to strengthen the science-policy interface. The IBFRA would be an ideal partner to conduct this type of work for boreal forests. This could be done in collaboration with the Circumboreal Working Group, which also aims to facilitate knowledge exchange, especially between research and policy makers.

IV. POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

22. The Committee may wish to invite member countries to increase the visibility and recognition of boreal forests in the relevant international policy fora and catalyse continuity and planning depth for the related scientific and technical cooperation.

23. The Committee may wish to recommend FAO to:

- Strengthen its work on boreal forests within its existing programmes and through existing mechanisms such as regional Working Groups or ToS;
- Ensure through its governing bodies, in particular the Conference, that activities on boreal forests are adequately reflected in the Programme of Work and Budget and the Medium Term Plan.