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Safeguarding an ecological success story

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Distinguished participants of the Engelberg Forest Week

I am honored and pleased to welcome you to the heart of the Swiss mountains and forests to Engelberg, for the Silva 2015 and 3rd European Forest Week.

I would like to thank UNECE and FAO for jointly preparing this event and for their efficient organizational support. I would also like to extend our gratitude to the Canton of Obwalden and of course to the municipality of Engelberg for being our local hosts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Do you remember, how colorful the forest looks in autumn? Do you remember, how soft feel the forest floor under your feet? Try it, and you will discover:

- Forests are our friends. They protect us from avalanches, rockfall, and landslides – in this valley you can observe this yourselves.
- Forests are important for survival of humankind. They filter drinking water, promote our health and protect biodiversity. They supply wood as raw material for ever more sophisticated products or as a source of energy.
- Forests and wood provide essential climate services: trees and forest soils store carbon dioxide, which later is transferred into roof beams that last decades and even centuries.

In Switzerland we were not always conscious of this. Our ancestors consumed too much wood, and the many goats owned by poor people ate most of the young trees. Wood from

Swiss forests was floated to Rotterdam for city and boat construction. This contributed significantly to the serious problems we had 150 years ago: water and debris from alpine valleys such as here in Engelberg caused flooding that extended far into the flatlands and cities.

This is why in 1876 the first National Forest Law was passed – a farsighted act. We also have to admit that we were lucky, since at the same time industrialization was occurring, and employment opportunities emerged that pulled many people from the mountains to the cities. This took pressure off the forests. In combination with the development of the economy, triggered by railroad construction and imported coal, took pressure off the forests and supported the implementation of the Forest Law.

Law and a favorable context are the most important ingredients for the success story of Swiss forests. Forests came back to occupy a considerable surface area, and the wood stocks have increased. Even more: forest owners and foresters have over the last hundred years brought forests back to their natural state, closer than during many centuries. That is why forests in Switzerland are the only managed areas in which biodiversity in the last decades has significantly improved. This Friday on the excursions you will have the opportunity to see these achievements.

Our task today is to maintain these achievements. At the same time new challenges must be tackled, and here I will name a few:

- An important impact of the Forest Law since its beginning is the consistent protection of forest area. Since today land is increasingly scarce, particularly in the lowlands, this strict protection is questioned. Taking into account the manifold demands in a more and more restricted landscape, we must be watchful of the demands being made on forest land. Globally, the lack of protection of the forest area is one of the greatest problems, and this is also a key reason that Switzerland strongly advocates legally binding rules that protect the global forest area, for example within the framework of the UN Climate Convention or the UN Forum on Forests.
- Climate change will be a great challenge for Swiss forests. This is happening at a speed far exceeding the slow growth processes of the forest. Tree seedlings sprouting today will live in a very different climate in 50 years. In order to secure the diverse services of the forest for the middle- and long-term, adaptation strategies are being developed today. In the ongoing revision of the Forest Law, additional resources of 20 million Francs per year are foreseen, half of which will be for protective forests with insufficient young growth.
- Climate change also facilitates pests which are spread by increasing trade flows and then survive the warmer winters. The revised Forest Law lays the foundations for resolving the problem. This will be possible when resources are made available to combat pests wherever they appear, including outside protective forests.

- The value of forests, which you have selected as the overall topic of this meeting, is this key issue. It is now obvious that the forest provides, for example, protection from natural hazards, drinking water of highest quality or superior recreation opportunities. That forest owners must deliver additional efforts or incur losses in safeguarding these forest services, is not generally understood or recognized. Therefore, it is valid to develop solutions in which beneficiaries could contribute to the costs of the forest services. This will support the forest owners and forest enterprises to ensure long-term performance of the forest services, as well as to optimally maintain the forest with a view to specific services.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I tried to show you the significance of our forests – here in Switzerland, but also in Europe and all over the world. Forests are essential for our survival in a heavily populated country. But the forests in remoted parts in South East Asia or in South America are comparatively even more precious for humanity and for the condition of our planet. We have to stop the over-exploitation or even the deforestation of those forests – immediately. Otherwise the people there will experience the same as the people in Switzerland did 150 years ago – also here in Engelberg. Let's do all we can do to avoid disasters. For the future of forests we are all responsible.

Thank you very much.