

Press Release
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



Role of forests essential in the climate change debate

23 September 2009, Joensuu, Finland - Without actions in forestry, it is unlikely that global climate change mitigation efforts will be successful in the short term, said Jan Heino, FAO Assistant Director-General for Forestry addressing the conference, "Facing the challenge – change in forests and the forestry sector" organized by the Conference of the European Economic and Social Committee, taking place in Joensuu Finland on 23-25 September.

This high level conference on European forests is addressing issues around forest-based industries, illegal logging and deforestation, and challenges posed by climate change.

Heino said that climate change and forests are intrinsically linked. Various forest ecosystems around the world are under stress through higher mean annual temperatures, altered precipitation patterns and more frequent and extreme weather events. In recent years in Europe, unusually severe storms have resulted in massive destruction of forests, southern areas have experienced several devastating forest fires in recent years and the composition and functions of forests have been slowly changing, as the natural ranges of plant and animal species shift.

The forestry sector, mainly through deforestation and by forest degradation in developing countries, accounts for 17 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. Existing technologies and knowledge in the forestry sector can be harnessed to reduce emissions, or sequester carbon, thus providing cost-effective and relatively rapid mitigation results.

Europe plays a lead role in climate change negotiations

"European countries are playing a lead role in the international climate change negotiations. While most of the attention is on a proposed incentive mechanism for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation" in developing countries, said Jan Heino, FAO's Assistant Director-General for Forestry, "the outcome of discussions on carbon accounting for harvested wood products and for forest management in the post Kyoto period may provide additional incentives for sustainable forest management in Europe and affect the way we use and manage our forests".

During the conference, Heino emphasized that: "Sustainable forest management has a significant strategic role in achieving long-term climate change mitigation and it provides a strong but flexible framework for effective adaptation".

Sustainable forest management is a concept that goes beyond the traditional focus of forest management for sustained timber production -- it includes forest management for conservation of forest biodiversity, support to livelihoods and provision of a range of forest goods and services, as well as addressing enabling factors of forest policy, governance and financing.

Incorporating climate change into existing policies and programmes aimed at achieving sustainable forest management helps to ensure that forests are managed not for carbon alone but for multiple benefits. Forests provide the homes and livelihoods of hundred of millions of people. They protect 80% of the world's biodiversity. Forested watersheds are a crucial source of clean water upon which all life depends.

Success in meeting adapting and mitigating climate change will be possible only if developing countries are part of the solution. It is incumbent on developed countries to assist them by facilitating technology transfer, strengthening capacities, and providing financial support and incentives.

"It is clear, as recognized by the European Economic and Social Committee, that Europe has an essential role to play both, at home and in developing countries, in supporting effective climate change responses in the forest sector ", Heino said.