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Status of the Near East Forests: Challenges and Development Potentials

I. INTRODUCTION

1. FRA 2015, has revealed that, even though the extent of the world's forest continues to decline, the rate of net forest loss has been cut by over 50 percent and that substantial progress has been made towards sustainable forest management (SFM), with 98 percent of global permanent forest area being covered by policies or regulations that support SFM. Forest resource data are being generated now at a greater frequency than at any other time in history and countries have more knowledge of their forest resources than ever before. The situation, however, looks somehow different in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region. The losses in the region's forests and Other Wooded Lands (OWL) are considerably high as compared to the extent of these resources. Moreover, forest policies/strategies and regulations, if present, are outdated and most countries have no updated data on their forest resources.

Extent of forests and Other Wooded Land in the Near East and North Africa region

2. FRA 2015 data for NENA region revealed that forest¹ cover is significantly small, estimated at 42 million hectares (3.0 percent of region's land area) while other wooded land² is estimated at 35.4 million hectares (table 1). In total both forests and OWL represents 5.4% of the land area of the region. Despite that the region's forest and forestry ecosystems play significant role in the livelihoods

¹ As defined by FAO: Land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 meters and with a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds *in situ*. It does not include land that is permanently under agricultural or urban land use.

² As defined by FAO: Other wooded land is defined as Land not classified as "Forest", spanning more than 0.5 ha; with trees higher than 5 meters and a canopy cover of 5-10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds *in situ*; or with a combined cover of shrubs, bushes and trees above 10 percent. It does not include land that is predominantly under agricultural or urban land use.



of rural people, in biodiversity and environmental conservation and in adaptation to, and mitigation of climate change.

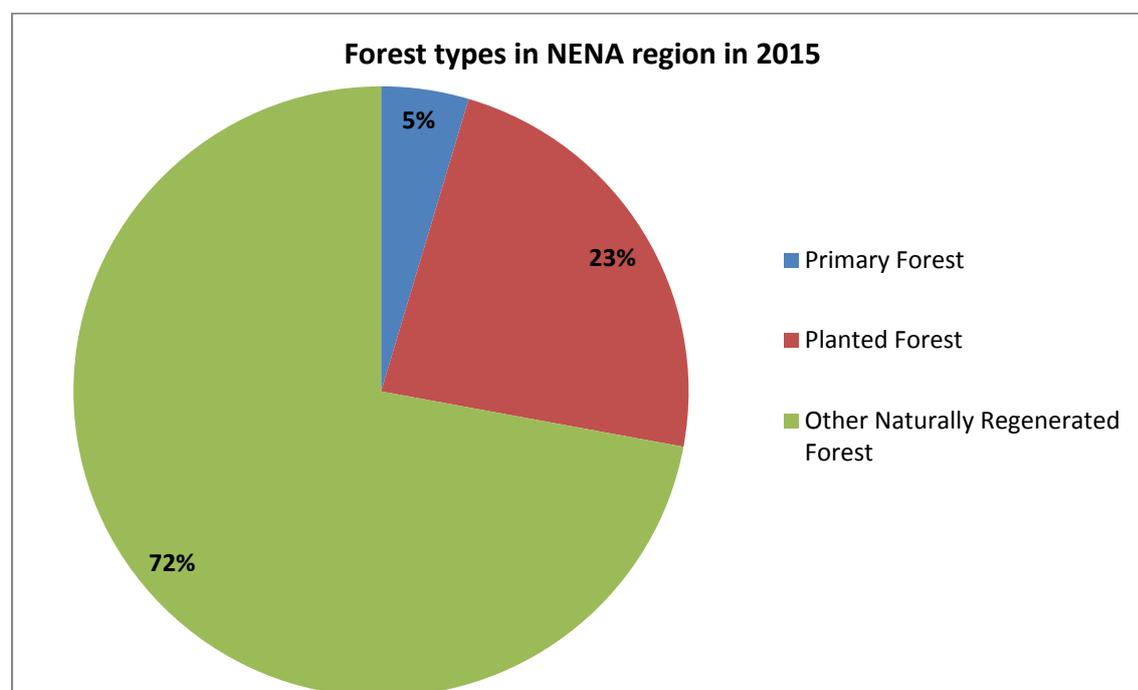
Table 1: Estimated area of forests and OWL (000 hectares) in NENA Region for each FRA since 1990

year	Area of forests (000 hectare)	Area of OWL (000 hectare)	Total area of forest & OWL (000 hectare)	% of forests & OWL from total land area
1990	43,767.5	41,180.1	84,947.7	5.9
2000	42,475.5	39,634.2	82,109.8	5.7
2010	43,285.5	37,996.4	81,281.9	5.7
2015	42,453.7	35,418.7	77,872.3	5.4

Types and functions of NENA forests

3. Figure 1 below shows that the majority of NENA forests are naturally regenerated (72%) with planted and primary³ forests representing, respectively, 23 % and 5 %, of the total forest area.

Figure 1: Type of forests in NENA region in 2015 in %



Source FRA 2015

4. NENA forests are managed primarily for the protection of soil and water, conservation of biodiversity and production of wood and non-wood forest products (NWFPs). Historically, the majority of the growing stock has been used for fuel in the region. Nearly 87 million people (19.4 % of the population) still use fuelwood for cooking. In some countries, fuelwood still plays an important role in the energy balance where it constitutes between 30 and 45 percent of the total primary energy supply.

³ As defined by FAO: Naturally regenerated forests of native tree species, where there are no clearly visible indications of human activities and the ecological processes are not significantly disturbed.

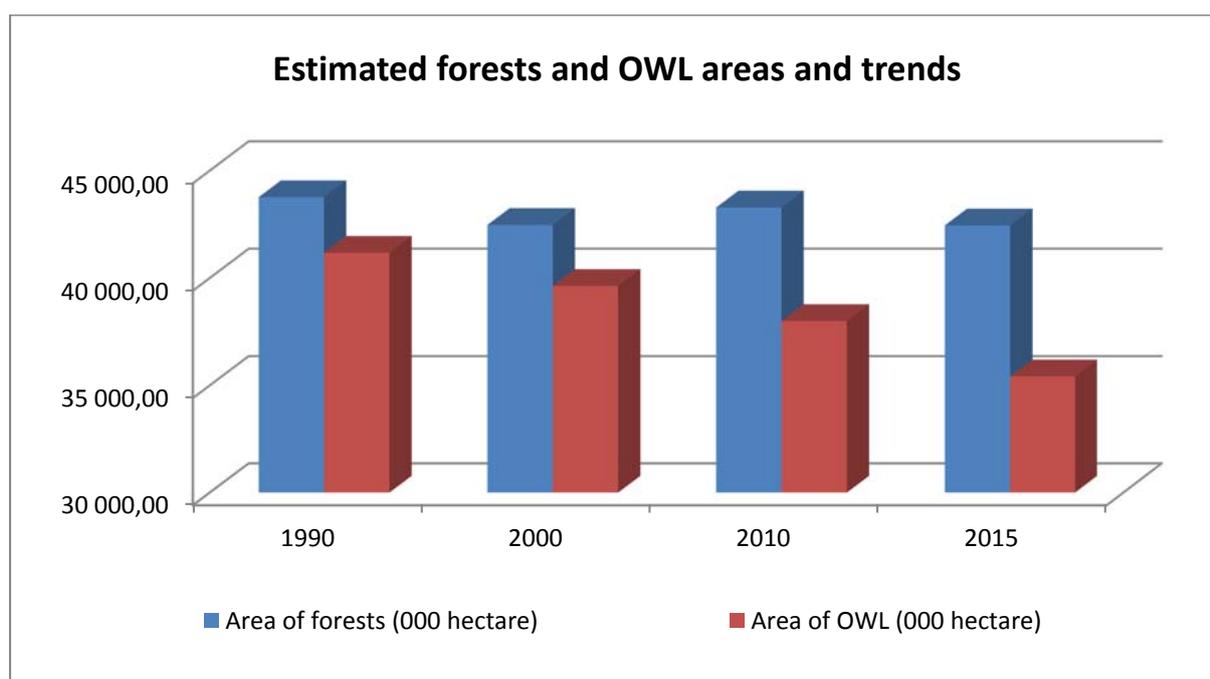
5. NWFPs contribute significantly to the rural household economy. In some countries the revenues from the exports of NWFPs are significant, exceeding by far those from wood products⁴. At the regional level, the contribution of the forest sector to the gross domestic product of the countries accounts to more than US\$11 billion. This reflects only part of the real contribution, since large quantities of NWFPs used by the local populations for their daily subsistence are not accounted for in the national statistics.

6. The array of NWFPs and services makes forests in many countries one of the pillars of the national strategies for poverty alleviation, socio economic development, food security and preservation of the multiple environmental services (biodiversity, landscape quality, preservation of water resources and fight against land degradation).

Area Changes in forests and other wooded land

7. During the last 25 years (1990-2015), NENA forest cover has decreased from 43,767,500 hectares to 42,453,700 hectares, with a total loss of 1,313,800 hectares. OWL cover has also decreased from 41,180,100 hectares, to 35,418,700 hectares equivalent to a total net loss of 5,761,400 hectares. The conversion of forest and OWL to other land uses was accelerated during the period of 2010 to 2015, and attributed mostly to conversion of OWL to agriculture.

Figure 2: Total area of forest and OWL by year (000 ha)

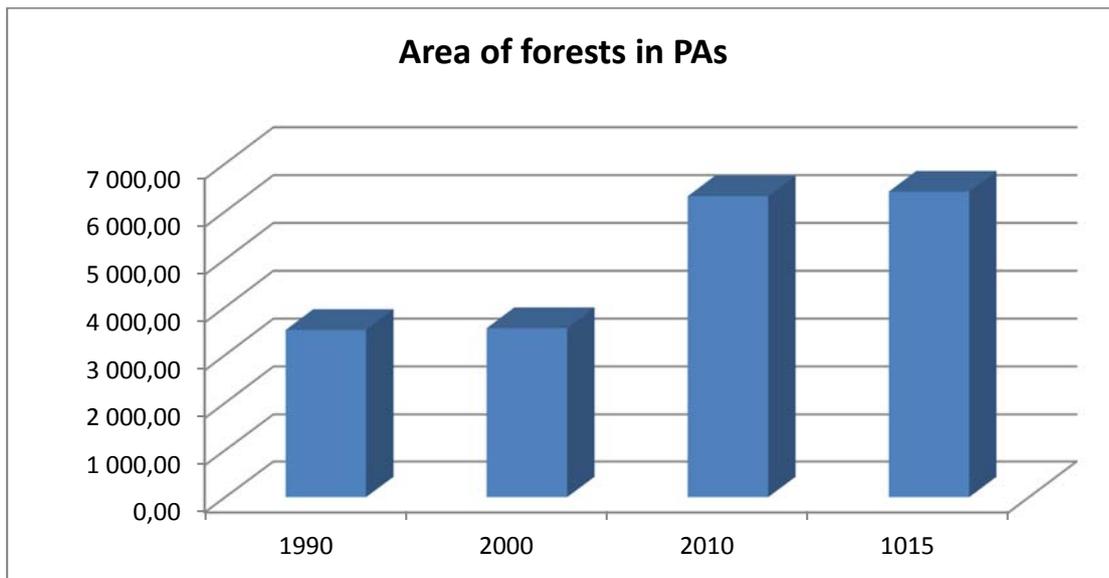


Source FRA 2015

8. The protected area (PAs) system in the NENA Region is sizeable with a large number of wild and endemic species. Comparing FRA data from 1990 and through to 2015, the area of forests under protected area has shown positive trend (Figure 3). However, these trends can only be verified for the countries with complete reporting on forest area in protected areas.

⁴ FAO, 2012, Experiences of Near East Countries on Utilization and Processing of Non-Wood Forest Products: Cases of Gum Arabic, Bee-Honey, Pistachios, Rosemary & Stone Pine

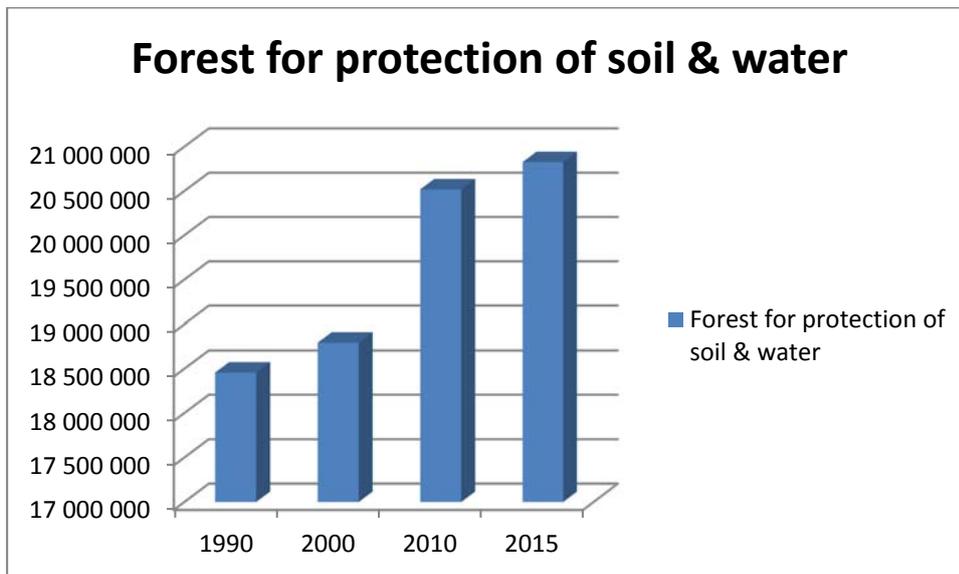
Figure 3: Protected Areas in NENA region since 1990



Source FRA reports 1990, 2000, 2010 2015.

9. Figure 4 below also shows positive evolution of the size of forests assigned to the protection of soil and water in the region, with an increase of 2.4 million hectares in the last 25 years.

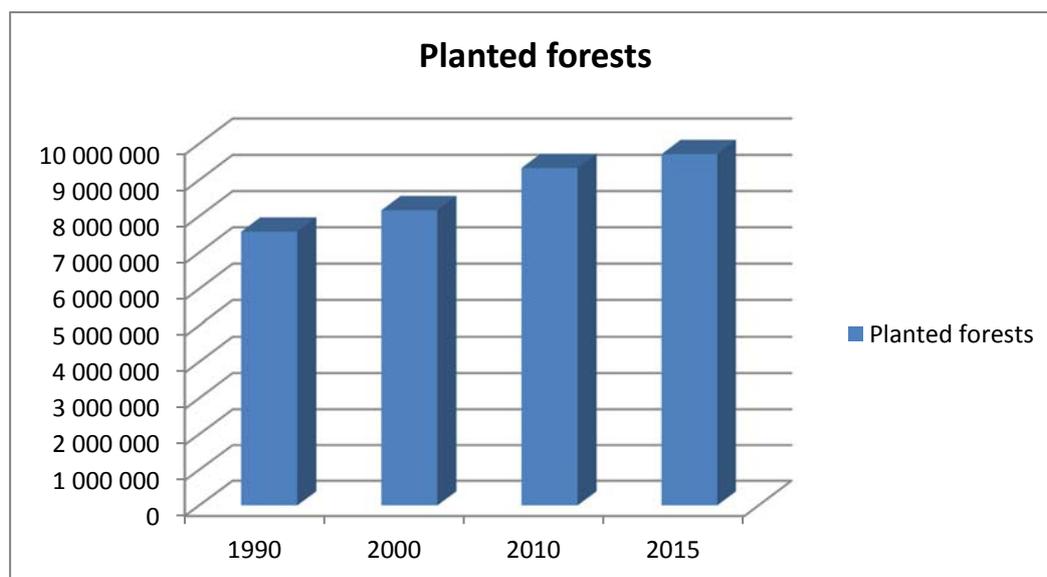
Figure 4: Forest area designated for protection of soil and water



Source FRA 2015

10. The area of planted forests in NENA region has also steadily increased in the last 25 years from 7.6 million hectares in 1990 to 9.7 million hectares in 2015 (figure 5). However, looking at the extent of planted forests and that of the natural forests and OWL (table 1), the gain in the area of planted forests (2.1 million hectares) is significantly small as compared with the total loss in the areas of forests and OWL (7.1 million hectares).

Figure 5: Area changes in planted forests from 1990 – 2015 in hectares



Source FRA 2015

Conclusions

11. NENA countries are among the least gifted with forestry resources and are also among those with the most scant information, despite the considerable importance of such resources for socio economic development, food security and the provision of various environmental services. Successive FRA reports have confirmed that forestry information in the NENA region is still poor and most countries lack the capacity to collect and report timely and reliable data on forest resources, forest cover changes, forest uses and users. This represents a major obstacle for sound national policies, proper planning, informed decisions and adequate reporting on the status of the resources at national level and to regional and international processes.

12. Conversion of forests and OWL in the region to other land uses is significantly high. Countries would need to take effective measures to curb the high rate of loss in their forest and OWL cover, if they have to conserve what have remained from their forest ecosystems. A paradigm shift is needed towards the adoption of more sustainable agricultural practices and integrated land use systems.

13. The scale at which planted forests is implemented in NENA region is considerably low as compared with rate of forest and OWL cover losses. Countries would need to exploit all available opportunities to scale up their tree planting programmes. In doing so, countries may need to seek investment options beyond their public finance. A major investment opportunity that has not been fully utilized is the public participation, including in the private sector finance. Other global financing mechanisms could also be sought.

14. FRA 2015 has shown that some countries are moving towards investing in afforestation activities for multiple purposes e.g. landscape restoration, production of wood energy and development of urban and peri-urban forestry. Such initiatives would need to be encouraged and scaled up.