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# PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

**Hundred and Twenty-eighth Session**

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**Update on Sustainable Forest Management**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020* examines the status of, and trends in more than 60 forest-related variables in 236 countries and territories for the period 1990–2020. The Key Findings, released in early May 2020, indicate that while the annual rate of net loss of forests has decreased substantially over the past 30 years, deforestation and forest degradation continue to take place at alarming rates, primarily in the tropics and subtropics. This contributes significantly to the on-going loss of biodiversity, impacts livelihoods and exacerbates climate change.
- *The State of the World's Forests 2020 Forests, Biodiversity and People*, to be released on 22 May 2020, builds on this assessment combined with a literature review and commissioned studies to examine progress in meeting global targets and goals related to forest biodiversity.
- This document presents the key conclusions of the above two publications and outlines recent global developments and their implications for FAO's work on forests and trees.

### GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Committee is invited to provide guidance on additional actions that FAO might take to help countries reduce the rates of deforestation and meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to forests as well as the Global Forest Goals.

### Draft Advice

#### **The Committee:**

- **noted the key findings of the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020 and the State of the World's Forests 2020;**
- **encouraged FAO to continue providing support to countries to prevent, halt and reverse deforestation and forest degradation; and**
- **recommended that FAO's new Strategic Framework adequately reflect priority actions needed for the conservation, improvement and sustainable utilization of forest resources.**

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## I. Introduction

1. FAO's work on forestry is guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated goals and targets; the Paris Agreement; the Aichi Biodiversity Targets; the *UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030*<sup>1</sup> with its six Global Forest Goals; the FAO Strategic Framework and the priorities set by the Committee on Forestry.

2. It is closely aligned with the UN Forest Instrument<sup>2</sup> and centres around the concept of sustainable forest management and its seven thematic elements<sup>3</sup>.

3. The Committee on Forestry, at its 24<sup>th</sup> Session in July 2018<sup>4</sup> supported the following eight thematic priority areas for FAO's work in forestry in 2018–2021, stressing the need for a complementary and integrated approach for agriculture and forests:

- a) halting deforestation globally, particularly from agriculture;
- b) addressing forest degradation and promoting sustainable forest management;
- c) increasing forest cover through restoration, reforestation and afforestation;
- d) improving forest-based livelihoods, prosperity and human well-being;
- e) mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and strengthening resilience of ecosystems and communities to climate change through forests;
- f) policy coherence *i.e.* mainstreaming forests through cross-sectoral and interagency approaches at all levels;
- g) increased means of implementation from all sources; and
- h) good governance frameworks at all levels.

## II. Status of the world's forests

### A. *The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020*

4. Since its creation in 1946, FAO has been monitoring the world's forest resources through periodical assessments conducted in cooperation with its member countries. *The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020* (FRA 2020), the latest of these assessments, examines the status of, and trends in, more than 60 forest-related variables in 236 countries and territories for the period 1990–2020.

5. The data in FRA 2020 – the “backbone” of the assessment – have been obtained through a transparent, traceable reporting process involving a well-established network of officially nominated national correspondents. The application of a standardized reporting methodology enables the monitoring of change over time in parameters such as forest area, management, ownership and use, and the aggregation of data at the regional and global levels.

6. The information provided by FRA presents a comprehensive view of the world's forests and the ways in which the resource is changing and supports the development of sound policies, practices and investments affecting forests and forestry.

7. In addition to the country reports, FAO also undertakes a global remote sensing survey together with countries in order to obtain comparable information (in time and in terms of assessment method) at regional, global and eco-zone level. The results of this assessment will be available in 2021.

<sup>1</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/RES/71/285>

<sup>2</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/RES/62/98> and <https://undocs.org/A/RES/70/199>

<sup>3</sup> The elements are (i) extent of forest resources; (ii) forest biological diversity; (iii) forest health and vitality; (iv) productive functions of forest resources; (v) protective functions of forest resources; (vi) socio-economic functions of forests; and (vii) legal, policy and institutional framework.

<sup>4</sup> [COFO/2018/REP](https://undocs.org/A/RES/71/285)

8. Key findings of FRA 2020 include the following:
- a) Forests cover an estimated 4.06 billion hectares equivalent to 30.8 percent of the land area, down from 32.5 percent in 1990.
  - b) Since 1990, some 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land uses, but the rate of deforestation has decreased substantially in the past 30 years. In the most recent five-year period (2015–2020), the annual rate of deforestation was estimated at 10 million hectares, down from 12 million hectares in 2010–2015, 15 million hectares per year in 2000–2010 and 16 million hectares per year in 1990–2000.
  - c) Afforestation and natural expansion of forests continues to take place in some areas, but at a slower rate than deforestation, resulting in a net loss of forest area globally. The net loss of forests between 1990 and 2020 was 178 million hectares, an area about the size of Libya. The rate of net forest loss declined from 7.8 million hectares per year in the decade 1990–2000 to 5.2 million hectares per year in 2000–2010 and 4.7 million hectares per year in 2010–2020 due to a reduction in deforestation in some countries and increases in forest area in others.
  - d) Although the net loss is decreasing, the world is not on track to meet the target of the *UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030* to increase forest area by 3 percent worldwide by 2030 (relative to 2015).
  - e) In 2015 (the latest date of data reported by countries), around 98 million hectares of forest were affected by fires. These fires occurred mainly in the tropics, where they affected about 4 percent of the forest area. More than two-thirds of the total forest area burned was located in South America and Africa.

*B. The State of the World's Forests 2020: Forests, Biodiversity and People*

9. This year's edition of *The State of the World's Forests* (SOFO) focused on the linkages between forests, biodiversity and people, and assessed progress towards goals and targets related to forest biodiversity. It built on the FRA 2020 results, complemented by a literature search and several commissioned analyses and case studies. The key messages include the following:

- a) **Agricultural expansion continues to be the main driver of deforestation and forest fragmentation and the associated loss of forest biodiversity.** Large-scale commercial agriculture (primarily cattle ranching and cultivation of soya bean and oil palm) accounted for 40 percent of tropical deforestation between 2000 and 2010 and local subsistence agriculture for another 33 percent. Yet, the resilience of human food systems and their capacity to adapt to future change depends on that very biodiversity – including dryland-adapted shrub and tree species that help combat desertification, forest-dwelling insects, bats and bird species that pollinate crops, trees with extensive root systems in mountain ecosystems that prevent soil erosion, and mangrove species that provide resilience against flooding in coastal areas. With climate change exacerbating the risks to food systems, the role of forests in capturing and storing carbon and mitigating climate change is of ever-increasing importance for the agricultural sector.
- b) **Feeding humanity and conserving and sustainably using ecosystems are complementary and closely interdependent goals.** Forests conserve water, mitigate climate change and provide habitats for many pollinators, which are essential for sustainable food production. It is estimated that 75 percent of the world's leading food crops, representing 35 percent of global food production, benefit from animal pollination. Worldwide, around 1 billion people depend to some extent on wild foods such as wild meat, edible insects, edible plant products, mushrooms and fish, which often contain high levels of key micronutrients. The value of forest foods as a nutritional resource is not limited to low- and middle-income countries; more than 100 million people in the

European Union (EU) regularly consume wild food. Some 2.4 billion people – in both urban and rural settings – use wood-based energy for cooking

- c) **We need to transform our food systems to halt deforestation and the loss of biodiversity.** Adopting agroforestry and sustainable production practices, restoring the productivity of degraded agricultural lands, embracing healthier diets and reducing food loss and waste are all actions that urgently need to be scaled up. Agribusinesses must meet their commitments to deforestation-free commodity chains and companies that have not made zero-deforestation commitments should do so. Commodity investors should adopt business models that are environmentally and socially responsible. These actions will, in many cases, require a revision of current policies – in particular fiscal policies – and regulatory frameworks.
- d) **Food security, agriculture and forestry need to be addressed together** so that increasing food production and forest area can be sustainably achieved while meeting climate change and biodiversity goals. As FAO’s “State of the World’s Forests 2016” has shown, enhancing production, increasing food security and maintaining or increasing forest area had been achieved by several countries. These results need to be scaled up or else the SDGs, including SDG2, will not be met.
- e) **Ensuring positive outcomes for both biodiversity and people requires a careful balance between conservation goals and demands for resources that support livelihoods.** There is an urgent need to ensure that biodiversity conservation be mainstreamed into forest management practices in all forest types. To do so, a realistic balance must be struck between conservation goals and local needs and demands for resources that support livelihoods, food security and human well-being. Sustainable pathways require effective governance; policy alignment between sectors and administrative levels; land-tenure security; respect for the rights and knowledge of local communities and indigenous peoples; and enhanced capacity for monitoring of biodiversity outcomes. It also requires innovative financing modalities.
- f) **Large scale forest restoration is needed to meet the SDGs and to prevent, halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity.** Forest restoration, when implemented appropriately, helps restore habitats and ecosystems, create jobs and income and is an effective nature-based solution to climate change.

#### *C. Progress towards forest-related SDG indicators under FAO’s custodianship*

- 10. The FAO Forestry Department is the custodian for three SDG indicators:
  - a) 15.1.1 Forest area as a proportion of total land area.
  - b) 15.2.1 Progress towards sustainable forest management.
  - c) 15.4.2 Mountain Green Cover Index
- 11. Progress towards 15.1.1 is reported through the FRA process. As listed above, forests currently cover 30.8 percent of the global land area, down from 32.5 percent in 1990. Data at country level will be released at the end of June.
- 12. SDG Indicator 15.2.1 is not easy to measure as no single quantifiable and measurable characteristic can fully describe the many social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable forest management. Recognizing this, FAO worked with partners to develop a methodology for reporting on this indicator, and a set of five sub-indicators was established to measure progress:
  - a) forest area annual net change rate;
  - b) above-ground biomass stock in forest;

- c) proportion of forest area located within legally established protected areas (indicating actions taken to protect and maintain biological diversity and other natural and cultural resources);
- d) proportion of forest area under a long-term forest management plan (indicating the intention to manage the forest for long-term purposes); and
- e) forest area under an independently verified forest management certification scheme (providing further qualification of the forest management).

13. Data for the first four sub-indicators are collected through the FRA country reporting process, while data on certified forest area are obtained from the main certification bodies. For each indicator, a detailed description of definitions and methodology is provided in the SDG metadata repository<sup>5</sup>. A traffic light system is used to indicate progress. Data will be released in early July.

14. Progress towards 15.4.2 is measured using remote sensing. Data, generated by FAO, will be sent to countries for validation by June and released in September.

### III. Recent global developments with implications for FAO's work on forests

#### D. Turning the tide on deforestation

15. At the Climate Action Summit in September 2019, the Secretary-General of the UN called for scaling up action on “Turning the tide on deforestation”, stating that “we must halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and change the way we farm”. At a subsequent meeting of the UN Executive Committee in October 2019 the Secretary-General requested that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and FAO, in collaboration with other relevant entities, form a small working group to follow up on a set of recommendations aimed at scaling up action to halt deforestation by the UN system as a whole.

16. At the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (UNFCCC COP 25), held on 12 December 2019, a high-level Leadership Dialogue on “Turning the tide on deforestation” was held with Heads of UN organizations from United Nations-Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), FAO, UNEP, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), expressing commitment to this common goal. At the Dialogue FAO Director-General QU Dongyu called for a transformational change aimed at addressing food security, agriculture and forestry together.

17. Efforts are currently underway to craft a set of common messages about the extent and drivers of deforestation and how to address these. These messages will be shared with all UN country teams and at relevant *fora*.

18. The mandate to FAO by the UN Secretary-General in the context of the Executive Committee (EXCOM); the UNFCCC COP25 UN Leadership Dialogue; existing partnerships such as United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD); as well as FAO's lead role in the UN Food Systems Summit, puts FAO in a strong position to co-lead efforts of the UN System.

19. Efforts are underway to develop a cross-sectoral initiative on “Transforming food systems to feed the planet without deforestation” and a related roadmap, responding to the request of the UN Secretary-General and using existing mechanisms and platforms to scale up country action.

20. The main aims of the initiative are to:

- a) support countries to achieve significant reductions in deforestation rates while enhancing agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, particularly by

<sup>5</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata>

building on and up-scaling existing projects and initiatives that address policy and regulatory changes, field level action, as well as monitoring of progress; and

- b) provide global and regional leadership in holding key policy and stakeholder dialogues, including in the context of the UN Food System Summit 2021.

#### *E. UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration*

21. In March 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring 2021–2030 the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and requested UNEP and FAO to lead the implementation in collaboration with other UN entities.
22. The Forestry Policy and Resources Division and the Land and Water Division co-lead this effort within FAO in close collaboration with all other technical units and regional offices.
23. Consultations with Member States, UN entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector and youth organizations took place throughout 2019. Based on these, a draft implementation strategy was prepared, which was sent to Member States and other stakeholders for comments in early March 2020. In addition, a website<sup>6</sup> has been established; a communication strategy developed; and task forces have been set up to develop a monitoring system and to gather and disseminate guidelines and good practices. A Multi-Partner Trust Fund is being established and resource mobilization efforts are underway.

#### *F. The post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework*

24. At the 2020 UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP15), to be held in Kunming, China, the CBD is expected to adopt a new global biodiversity framework. Various topics relevant to FAO's work are part of the draft framework that is currently being discussed.

#### *G. Big data and technological innovations*

25. FAO is taking advantage of recent developments related to the availability of high-resolution and near-real time satellite imagery and is providing support and cutting-edge technology and tools to help countries to better monitor their forest cover and changes over time through our National Forest Monitoring Programme. The further use of big data to fill information gaps and e.g. adequately capture contributions of forests to people could be further explored.

#### *H. COVID-19*

26. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has focused attention on zoonotic diseases and on the interactions between people, wildlife and livestock but also on the effects of human population growth, landscape changes and habitat loss as potential drivers of the (re-) emergence of infectious diseases.

### **IV. FAO's Forestry Programme**

27. The FAO Forestry Programme covers all aspects related to forests, from assessment of the resources to their conservation, management and sustainable use, as well as the enabling environment. The staff contingent is composed of four positions at Director level and above and 44 professionals in the PWB in the current biennium. All senior staff (P5 level positions) are Team Leaders and hence responsible for management, quality assurance and administrative issues, as well as technical work. Some 85 percent of the annual delivery of the Department is from extra-budgetary resources.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>

28. The Forestry Department is building on existing programmes and on established strategic partnerships with other forest-related organizations. In keeping with the SDGs, the Global Forest Goals, the Paris Agreement, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets and guidance provided by the Committee on Forestry (COFO), activities are clustered around three key areas of work: halting deforestation and forest degradation; the sustainable management and use of forest resources to enhance forest-based livelihoods; and forest restoration, reforestation and afforestation.

## **V. Issues to be addressed**

29. Despite efforts by Members and FAO, deforestation continues to take place at alarming rates, primarily in the tropics and subtropics. This contributes significantly to the on-going loss of biodiversity, impacts livelihoods and exacerbates climate change.

30. The drivers of deforestation and degradation – and the associated forest fires – are primarily agricultural expansion. In some regions due to large-scale commercial agriculture, in others due to small-scale subsistence farming. This requires tailored solutions and a transformative change of food systems.

31. Concerted efforts to move towards more sustainable food systems will, in many cases, require a revision and alignment of current policies – in particular fiscal policies – and regulatory frameworks. Such actions are politically sensitive issues in many countries and cannot be addressed by the ministries of forestry. They also require a closer collaboration with the private sector – including in agricultural commodity supply chains.

32. One way to increase the availability of agricultural land is through the restoration of the productivity of degraded agricultural lands and there is strong support for the restoration agenda and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. It will be important to build on this momentum.

33. Private sector commitments to reduce net emissions in the context of the Paris Agreement and voluntary partnerships are creating new opportunities for market transactions for carbon offsets from forests. While this could entail substantial funding for tree planting and other restoration efforts, concerns have been raised about risks related to such transactions. FAO is providing guidance to countries on opportunities, implications and technical considerations related to evolving carbon markets, in particular with a view to ensuring the integrity of countries' own commitments under the UNFCCC/Paris Agreement.