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Organización
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COMMITTEE ON FORESTRY

TWENTIETH SESSION

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GLOBAL FOREST RESOURCES ASSESSMENT (FRA): THE WAY FORWARD

INTRODUCTION

1. FAO has been conducting global forest resources assessments (FRA) at five to ten year intervals since 1946¹. The mandate for these assessments is found in the FAO Constitution, which states that “The Organization shall collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to nutrition, food and agriculture. In this Constitution, the term ‘agriculture’ and its derivatives include fisheries, marine products, forestry and primary forestry products.” (Article I, Functions of the Organization, paragraph 1).

2. The scope and content of these assessments have evolved over time to respond to changing information needs: from timber supply trends through the 1960s to environmental dimensions of forest in the 1970s through 1990 with particular focus on the rate of deforestation. FRA 2000 was designed to cover a wider range of forest benefits and functions, while FRA 2005 was focused on the concept of sustainable forest management, encompassing social, economic and environmental dimensions of forests. Further, the FRA 2005 process involved countries to a much greater degree than previous assessments, leading to a higher response rate and quality control of information at the national level.

¹ The reporting years have been as follows: 1946-1948, 1953, 1958, 1963, mid-1970s (regional assessments), 1980, 1988, 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005.

FRA 2010: The scope

3. FAO worked closely with countries and partner organizations in the design and implementation of FRA 2010. New variables were included in FRA 2010 to enable the assessment of progress towards the 2010 Biodiversity Target of the Convention on Biological Diversity and towards the four Global Objectives on Forests of the Non-legally Binding Instrument on all Types of Forests adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at its 62nd session. For the first time FRA 2010 also includes the legal, policy and institutional framework guiding forests and their management and use and hence it covers all seven thematic elements of sustainable forest management² As a result, FRA 2010 examines the current status and recent trends for more than 90 variables and all types of forests.

FRA 2010: The process

4. Closer collaboration with other reporting processes during the FRA 2010 process sought to avoid duplication of effort for variables that are reported to several agencies. For example, further streamlining of reporting to FAO, the International Tropical Timber Organization and Forests Europe was achieved and methods for reporting on variables related to forest biomass and carbon were harmonized with the latest specifications and guidelines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The proportion of land area under forests, reported to FAO as part of FRA 2010, is also used as one of the indicators of progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goals. Efforts have also continued to establish and maintain globally consistent definitions in the FRA process, in order to ensure consistency over time and reduce the overall reporting burden on countries.

5. In line with recommendations from Kotka V and COFO 2007, FAO requested countries to officially nominate a national correspondent for the FRA 2010 process. At present, 178 national correspondents are confirmed. These correspondents, and their respective professional networks in the countries, represent a tremendous strength of the FRA 2010 process, and were responsible for coordinating inputs and preparing country reports according to a standard format in English, French or Spanish. A training session, attended by 265 forest assessment specialists, including representatives from 154 countries and 14 key forest-related organizations, was held in March 2008 in Rome, and detailed guidelines, specifications and reporting formats were provided in five languages.

6. A total of ten regional and subregional workshops were held to review the draft reports, to share experiences and to address specific questions and issues related to data availability and interpretation. The final reports are thus the result of an iterative process and a collaborative effort. Before publishing, all country reports were sent to the head of forestry in the respective country for final validation.

² Extent of forest resources; Forest biological diversity; Forest health and vitality; Productive functions of forest resources; Protective functions of forest resources; Socio-economic functions of forests; and Legal, policy and institutional framework.

FRA 2010: The outputs

7. In addition to the main report, other major outputs of FRA 2010 include:

Country reports. A total of 233 detailed reports from countries and territories have been prepared, listing the data sources and original data, and describing the methodologies used for estimation, forecasting and reclassification, as well as any assumptions made.

Global tables. A set of some 40 global tables have been compiled based on the information provided by the countries.

Key findings. The key findings of FRA 2010 were released in March 2010.

These outputs are available at the FRA 2010 website (www.fao.org/forestry/fra2010)

A global remote sensing survey. Together with key partner organizations and with the involvement of remote sensing specialists in around 150 countries, a global remote sensing survey of forests is being carried out as part of FRA 2010 to provide additional and more consistent information on deforestation, afforestation and natural expansion of forests at regional and biome levels for the period 1990–2005. Results are expected at the end of 2011.

Special studies. A number of special studies provide complementary information on selected topics: forest degradation; trees outside forests; forests, poverty and livelihoods; forest genetic resources; forests and forestry in small islands. Each of these studies will be published separately.

THE WAY FORWARD: KEY ISSUES

8. The aim of the global forest resources assessments is to provide valuable information to policy-makers in countries, to international negotiations, arrangements and organizations related to forests and to the general public, so that policy and practice affecting forest and forestry are based on timely and reliable information.

Meeting the information needs

9. Feedback from a recent auto-evaluation of the FRA programme indicates that while the scope of the global forest resources assessments has increased significantly over the last ten years, the quality and timeliness of information are still issues of concern – as is the increasing reporting burden on countries.

10. Efforts are needed on two fronts: improved availability and quality of data in countries (e.g. through the implementation of National Forest Monitoring and Assessment systems) and more frequent release of information on a few selected variables (e.g. forest area, growing stock and carbon) to better serve the needs of international organizations and negotiations – e.g. through a rolling up-date as and when new information becomes available. This should be combined with increased use of electronic tools for data compilation and analysis at the global level to ease the reporting burden and facilitate data analysis.

11. Specific efforts are required to improve information on rates of deforestation and forest degradation, forest carbon stocks, trees outside forests and the roles of forests in protection of soil and water resources and in the provision of livelihoods.

12. Achieving improvements in the quality and reliability of FRA data depends very much on the active participation and leadership by countries.

Remote sensing of forests

13. The application of remote sensing to complement information received from countries was first used in FRA 1980. Until FRA 2000 this was limited to the pantropical region and there was no remote sensing component in FRA 2005. The FRA 2010 remote sensing survey is an ambitious initiative aimed at setting up a long-term global forest monitoring framework, focusing on generating consistent data on trends in broad forest types spanning national borders. By involving countries in the process, results will be more accurate and capacity built in developing countries to use such tools at national level – e.g. as input to determining the reference emission level and to monitor future trends for the proposed REDD-plus scheme.

14. There are numerous other actors wishing to set up an independent forest monitoring system based on remote sensing and much effort has been spent on establishing strategic partnerships in this field, including with the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), the European Commission Joint Research Centre, South Dakota State University, Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) and others. To continue this work and meet the requests for technical assistance from countries in the use of remote sensing requires adequate human and financial resources.

Human and financial resources

15. More than 900 specialists have been involved in the FRA 2010 country reporting process, including the 178 national correspondents and their teams, an advisory group, international experts, FAO staff, consultants and volunteers from around the world. An estimated 200-300 additional specialists will be involved in the remote sensing survey and the special studies.

16. FRA 2010 was coordinated by the Global Forest Assessment and Reporting Team at FAO headquarters in Rome. Six staff members, including project and administrative staff, were engaged full time throughout the process and acted as focal points for each region in order to facilitate communications between the national correspondents and FAO.

17. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva was a key institutional partner, handling communications and support to European countries.

18. The total cost of FRA 2010 is conservatively estimated at approximately US\$ 25 million over a five year period – the vast majority of this as in-kind contributions by national correspondents and their teams and by key partners involved in the remote sensing survey.

19. FAO's regular programme budget has contributed an estimated US\$ 5 million over the past five years. The remote sensing survey is financed entirely from extra-budgetary resources, which have also allowed for the employment of two project staff as regional focal points for the country reporting process as well as the conduct of one global and ten regional training and validation workshops.

20. The growing contribution from the Regular Programme in recent years is welcome but even this growth does not keep pace with the rapidly expanding demand by countries and international efforts to have quality information on the world's forest resources and their use and with the need for country involvement and capacity building as well as for the use of new technology, including remote sensing.

21. Securing adequate, long-term funding for what has now become a continuous process remains a key issue of concern.

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMITTEE

22. The Committee may wish to recommend that the next Global Forest Resource Assessment be prepared by 2015 and that:

- FRA 2015 give priority to improving information on rates of deforestation and forest degradation, forest carbon stocks, trees outside forests and the roles of forests in protection of soil and water resources and in the provision of livelihoods;³
- Countries actively contribute to the FRA process, including through providing high quality information on forests;
- Countries in a position to do so contribute to the voluntary open-ended trust fund with a strong focus on country capacity building; and
- Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) members and other relevant forest-related organizations continue supporting the FRA process.

23. To promote a Global Forest Resource Assessment that meets long-term global needs, the Committee may wish to request FAO to:

- prepare a long-term strategy for the FRA programme consistent with prospects for sustainable funding;
- continue streamlining forest-related reporting and building capacity nationally and internationally;

³ These are the most pressing requirements articulated through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations and the review of progress towards the biodiversity targets of the CBD as well as the forthcoming reviews of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Objectives on Forests of the UNFF.

- investigate the feasibility of more frequent reporting on a selection of key variables without unduly increasing the reporting burden on countries;
- continue to coordinate international efforts to use remote sensing to monitor forests at the global level and to build capacities in countries in the use of remote sensing data and tools for their interpretation;

24. The Committee may wish to invite the governing bodies of the CPF member organizations to consider the information and analysis provided by FRA in their work and recommend to the United Nations Forum on Forests that the results of FRA 2010 and FRA 2015 be used as an objective indicator of progress towards sustainable forest management.