

COFO 2005 Dialogue into action

High-level forest policy-makers from around the world, gathered in Rome in March 2005, confirmed their commitment to sustainable forest management, pursuit of international cooperation on forest fires, enhancing the role of the forest sector in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and post-tsunami rehabilitation in the forest sector.

Attendance at the Ministerial Meeting on Forests, held 14 March, and the seventeenth session of the FAO Committee on Forestry (COFO), held 15 to 19 March, was record breaking: 700 in all, including 90 heads of national forestry agencies. This issue of *Unasylva* presents some of the highlights: speeches presented by FAO leaders and special guests, articles recapturing some of the main themes, and summaries of selected side events.

COFO is FAO's governing body in forestry; it is made up of senior government officials of all FAO member countries that wish to participate. COFO has met every other year since 1947. FAO has hosted two other Ministerial Meetings in forestry, in 1995 and 1999.

Appraising the discussions and recommendations in the first article, D. Kneeland and T. Vahanen conclude that the combination of policy discussion and technical presentations made the 2005 COFO more stimulating than ever. They affirm the value of global intergovernmental dialogue, as it provides the stimulus for important initiatives in the forest sector and supports national-level action. Key mechanisms in this regard also include FAO's Regional Forestry Commissions and the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). Delegates confirmed their support for the regional processes and for FAO's continuing leadership of CPF.

The issue continues with the speeches of FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf and honoured guest Denis Sassou Nguesso, President of the Republic of the Congo, to the Ministerial Meeting. The Director-General hailed the focus of the agenda: strengthening international cooperation on forest fires and maintaining commitment to sustainable forest management. President Sassou Nguesso called in particular for increased political commitment on behalf of Congo Basin forests. The statement adopted by ministers and senior officials from 126 countries and the European Community, affirming their commitments, is presented in full.

FAO Deputy Director-General David Harcharik formally opened the seventeenth session of COFO, drawing attention

to the features that made the 2005 meeting special. Guest speakers at the opening session of COFO included the Prime Minister of Finland, Matti Vanhanen, and Wangari Maathai, Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya and 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. The Prime Minister noted that although much of Finland's economic development has been based on large-scale use of wood from the forest, forest cover in Finland is growing and conservation is thriving. Maathai, recently named Goodwill Ambassador for Congo Basin forests, echoed the plea for assistance to the forests of Central Africa made by the President of the Congo the day before, pointing out that investment in forest protection and conservation would preempt conflict and be an investment in peace.

The vital role of forests in achieving the MDGs – particularly poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability, but also all other goals – was one of the key themes reiterated throughout the week. *Unasylva* enumerates forests' potential contributions and notes the importance of cross-sectoral integration to include forest considerations in national poverty reduction strategies and to include poverty reduction in forest policy and planning.

The role of the forest sector in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of areas affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 was on the agenda of both the Ministerial Meeting and COFO. An article developed from the background document emphasizes FAO's coordinating and technical advisory role, for which countries expressed their support.

In addition to formal discussions in plenary, COFO featured 19 side events on a wide range of technical and policy topics, many organized by FAO's partners including CPF member organizations, NGOs and the private sector. This issue summarizes a selection of them, on bioenergy, law compliance, the changing interface of forestry and agriculture, and the role of civil society in national forest programmes.

The reports and background documents, in FAO's five official languages, are available on the FAO Web site (www.fao.org/forestry).

The meetings at FAO in March 2005 highlighted the linkages between forestry and sustainable development goals. They accentuated that forest management must be economically viable if the environmental and social benefits of forests are to be realized – the theme of *State of the World's Forests 2005*, FAO's flagship publication in forestry, which was officially released at COFO.

COFO emphasized trying to find innovative ways to link high-level policy dialogue with meaningful action in the field. This is the challenge that participants in global meetings take home with them. FAO would welcome suggestions from readers on how to meet this challenge more effectively. ♦