



Threats to forests could imperil global freshwater supplies
*International Day of Forests marked at United Nations with panel discussion
on link between forests, water and sustainable livelihoods*

March 21, New York – Safeguarding forests is essential for sustainable management of global freshwater resources and avoiding water shortages, according to United Nations officials and forest experts at an event today marking the International Day of Forests. The observance day, held annually on 21 March, was commemorated at UN Headquarters with a panel discussion called “Forests and Water: Sustain Life and Livelihoods,” sponsored by the UN Forum on Forests Secretariat, UN-Water and the Permanent Mission of Sweden.

By 2025, some 1.8 billion people will face absolute water scarcity, and even greater numbers will deal with water stressed conditions. Three-fourths of the freshwater that people use every day, comes from forested catchment areas. Around 1.6 billion people worldwide depend on forests for their basic needs of food, medicine, fuel, energy and income. The environmental services that forests offer, in terms of improving the quality of air, water and climate, are global goods that benefit all.

“The world’s forests are essential to realizing our shared vision for people and the planet,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his message for the International Day. “They are central to our future prosperity and the stability of the global climate. That is why the Sustainable Development Goals call for transformative action to safeguard them.”

The global community recognises the importance of water and forests in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 6, about water and sanitation, and Goal 15, regarding the protection of biodiversity. Additionally, Wu Hongbo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said at the observance event Monday that these vital resources are important for all of the seventeen goals. Recognising the close interlinkages between water systems and forest ecosystems, Wu added that the successful implementation of forests and water-related goals and targets would necessitate integrated and coordinated approaches across the two sectors.

The importance of forests in safeguarding freshwater resources was stressed by Manoel Sobral Filho, Director of the UN Forum on Forests Secretariat: “The protection and restoration of forest watersheds and catchments is not just climate-smart, it is a cost-effective and green alternative to new infrastructure development for water purification. Forests are the planet’s natural water towers.”

Underscoring this, René Castro Salazar, Assistant Director-General, Forestry Department, of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), highlighted forested watersheds and wetlands influence how and where rain falls, and filter and clean our water.

“We should think of forests every time we turn on a tap,” Mr. Castro Salazar said. “Protecting our forests protects the fresh water we need to survive.”

2016 Theme: Supporting Water Systems

“Our planet depends on its forests and water, without them our societies would simply not exist,” said Guy Ryder, Director-General of ILO and Chair of UN-Water, in a statement for the International Day. He added that the annual observance provides a platform to highlight “the vital



role of those working to sustainably manage our forests and water resources to preserve the lives and livelihoods of millions of people and for future generations.”

The critical link between forests and climate was also stressed by UNDP Administrator Helen Clark in her statement for the Day: “As the largest terrestrial storehouses of carbon, forests play a massive role in addressing climate change and are also a vital source of energy, water, livelihoods, and biodiversity. The health of forests is also essential for 1.6 billion people, including many of the world’s poorest people, who depend on them directly for their food, fuel, shelter and medicine.”

To preserve these resources, Steven Johnson, Officer-in-Charge of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), recommended increasing capacity for sound land-use planning “to safeguard the potential of tropical forests and landscapes to provide the full range of benefits to society, including water supply.”

Mike Wingfield, President of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), noted the need for better information and scientific knowledge of forests and water. IUFRO, he added, is working to address the gaps regarding what we know of the forest and water relationship through a new interdisciplinary Task Force on Forests, Soil and Water Interactions.

The annual celebration of the International Day of Forests raises awareness of the importance of forests and trees, and serves as a platform to highlight best practices in sustainable forest management, from around the world.

For more information, please visit:

UN Forum on Forests website: <http://www.un.org/esa/forests>

The Sustainable Development Goal Indicators website: <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs>

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