

Joint Statement by the Chair of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry Bureau (COFFI) and the Acting Chair of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) European Forestry Commission Executive Committee (EFC)



On the occasion of the 15th session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF)

Excellencies,
Dear colleagues,
Delegates,

The COVID-19 Pandemic has prevented us from addressing you in person at the 15th session of the United Nations Forum on Forests, and we write this message at a time of great turmoil and suffering for people all around the globe. While the world's attention is rightfully directed to immediate actions to address the current crisis, we cannot lose focus on longer-term actions to confront this and similar threats facing humanity. We emphatically believe that forests and sustainable forest management have a major role to play in this effort.

The current pandemic brings important messages for our respective organizations. First, it highlights civilization's fundamental reliance on (and susceptibility to) natural processes, including those pertaining to forests. Also, the pandemic reminds us that the future will not wait for us to first put our house in order. In the face of rising impacts from human activity worldwide and the underlying threat of climate change, we can expect similar crises in the future, though exactly what and when remains unknown. Another message is that the challenges we face span political and cultural boundaries, and they demand effective cooperation and integrated action from local to global scales—we are all in this together and must act together. And finally, the current crisis emphasizes the need to adapt. Just as we are now adjusting our day-to-day business practices to accommodate social-distancing, we need to resolutely pursue medium to long term adaptations in the way we interact with our environment.

Each of these messages has major implications for sustainable forest management and for the work implemented jointly by our organizations in the region. And they prompt us to redouble our efforts in the key areas of our cooperative endeavor: monitoring and assessing forest conditions so that management and policy decisions are based on sound information; promoting dialogue and collaboration so that our actions are coordinated and effective; communicating to the public the importance of forests and the myriad benefits they can provide to humanity; and building capacity for sustainable forest management within our member countries. In pursuing this work, we look to the excellent guidance set forth in the UN Strategic Plan for Forests and its six Global Forest Goals, and we look forward to ongoing collaboration between our two fora.

To this end, the UNECE and FAO – in continuation of their close collaboration on forests since 1947 – will step up their efforts to support countries in the region by facilitating professional exchange, providing models of best practices, and helping countries with capacity building and policy advice.

A good example is our recent work on forest landscape restoration in support of the Bonn Challenge – a global effort to restore 150 million hectares of deforested and degraded land worldwide. This work has already resulted in countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus committing to restore 3 million hectares of degraded land by 2030, and support will now be extended to countries in Eastern and South-East Europe. This effort is further bolstered by our work in Central Asia and the Caucasus to support the development of national criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management, a tool that will improve monitoring, assessment and reporting of key aspects of SFM performance in the region.

Decision-making and implementation of solutions need to be guided by reliable and sufficient data. One of the recognized strengths of the cooperation of UNECE and FAO in the region is its crucial work, undertaken in collaboration with many partners, in compiling, analysing and delivering the most up to date information on the state of forests and the forest sector in the region. This work contributes to two major reports that will be published in the upcoming months: the Global Forest Resource Assessments 2020¹ and the State of Europe's Forests 2020 Report². Both reports, and the data delivery platforms that accompany them, will help countries access reliable data and information and thereby strengthen capacity to properly manage their forests and related terrestrial resources. Less visible but equally important is the collaboration within COFFI and EFC of country representatives, researchers, and others from across North America and the pan-European region in the joint production of various data and analysis products.

The current crises notwithstanding, global demand for all products is expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades. The reduction of wasteful consumption and the disposal of plastics and non-biodegradable materials remains a priority. Through increased production efficiency, reuse and recycling, the circular economy and related resource efficiency concepts offer a unique strategy to tackle this problem in innovative and sustainable ways. As a foundational material and quintessentially renewable resource, wood has an important role to play in a diverse range of sectors, with new applications for wood and fiber emerging at an accelerating pace. In their many public outreach activities, COFFI and EFC have explored new applications of wood in various sectors, ranging from the use of wood materials in multi-story buildings, to second generation recyclable packaging, to textiles and fashion. At the programmatic level, COFFI and EFC have further paved the way for this transition through the adoption of the Rovaniemi Action Plan on the Forest Sector in a Green Economy, a voluntary guiding tool for member States and international actors in the region. The role of forests in a Green Economy and related concepts will continue to be a focus for COFFI and EFC in the future.

¹ <http://www.fao.org/forest-resources-assessment/en/>

² <https://foresteurope.org/>

We must not forget that the threat of climate change looms large over our forest ecosystems with impacts already apparent in many places. The boreal forest, which comprises the largest share of forests in the region, is the world's largest terrestrial sink for CO₂ and is particularly affected by changing climate conditions, posing challenges for ecosystem adaptation and the risk of massive greenhouse gas release. This, and the fact that boreal forests are an important resource base for a number of COFFI and EFC member states, points to the need for better cooperation in the region. To address these issues, COFFI and EFC recently established a dedicated Team of Specialists on Boreal Forests.

Excellencies, colleagues, and delegates,

As we proceed into a period of uncertainty, we must not allow ourselves to slip into complacency or shortsightedness. Rather, we must strengthen our efforts to encourage countries to maintain, restore and protect the health and vitality of their forests, and to enhance the benefits these forests and their various outputs bring to society when sustainably managed. We intend to make sure that our organization's new Integrated Programme of Work, which will be prepared over the next year and presented for adoption at the joint session of COFFI and EFC in November 2021, will support Member States and the region as a whole in this important work.

We confirm our willingness to further support the implementation of UN Strategic Plan for Forest and the new Quadrennial Programme of work 2021-2024 and to share the technical expertise of COFFI and EFC through coordination with relevant regional and subregional organizations and processes.

We also invite you, as a leading forest-related global body, to continue and further enhance your important efforts to strengthen sustainable forest management worldwide. Let us act together in this Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and to help confront the critical challenges facing humanity today and in the coming decades.



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