



CONCEPT NOTE

Significance of dryland forests for achieving land degradation neutrality, combatting biodiversity loss and climate change

**A Side Event Co-Organized by the Secretariat of the UN Forum on Forests and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
6 December 2024, 13h – 14h30, Room *MET 8, Blue Zone*
Sixteenth Conference of Parties of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

I. Background

The Bureau of the twentieth session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF20), in response to the proposal of Saudi Arabia, decided that “dryland forests” be discussed under the agenda item of “emerging issues” during UNFF20. This decision is based on the significance of dryland forests for socio-economic development and environmental integrity of many countries.

II. Context for the Discussion

Drylands cover about 41% of the planet’s lands. They are characterized by a scarcity of water, which affects both natural and managed ecosystems and constrains the production of livestock as well as crops, wood, forage and other plants, and affects the delivery of environmental services. For millennia, drylands have been shaped by a combination of low precipitation, droughts, and heat waves, as well as human activities such as fire use, livestock grazing, the collection of wood and non-wood forest products (NWFPs), and soil cultivation. Dryland soils tend to be vulnerable to wind and water erosion, subject to intensive mineral weathering, and of low fertility. Drylands are also characterized by species that are highly specialized and adapted to the extreme dryland conditions including drought, salinity, temperature extreme variations and heat. Many dryland species, therefore, have great value in efforts to adapt to climate change. Furthermore, the biodiversity of drylands forms the basis of diverse livelihoods, and its conservation and sustainable use is a key to improving livelihoods. Drylands are found in most of the world’s biomes and climatic zones.

Global drylands contain 1.1 billion hectares of forests, which is 27 percent of the worlds’ forest area.¹ Drylands are home to about 2 billion people, the majority of whom depend on ecosystem services from forests and trees outside forests. Many dryland tree species are emblematic because of their key ecological and cultural functions and the important environmental services and products they provide, such as products for day-to-day livelihoods and to generate income, including a large variety of non-wood forest products. Trees and forests in drylands facilitate the infiltration of water into the soil and redistribute water upwards – thereby improving nutrient cycling and the water balance, helping to maintain air humidity, and reducing soil erosion by wind. They constitute a buffer against drought, desertification, dust and sandstorms. Dryland forests and landscapes play a crucial role in providing habitats for fauna and flora. Dryland forests also contain unique and globally important biodiversity, protect against land degradation, and play an important role in mitigating climate change through carbon storage

¹ FAO. 2019. Trees, forests and land use in drylands: the first global assessment – Full report. FAO Forestry Paper No. 184. Rome.

in soils and vegetation. Despite their importance, dryland forests are increasingly threatened by unsustainable activities and land-use change, as well as droughts, sandstorms, and desertification. The conservation, restoration and sustainable management of forest drylands are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as globally agreed objectives on climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation neutrality.

The United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) has long recognized the special needs of countries with low forest cover and countries affected by drought and desertification. Dryland forests are basically found in this group of countries. There is scope for further cooperation between UNFF, the UNCCD, UNFCCC and UNCBD in strengthening the capacity of low forest cover countries to implement strategies aimed at protecting, conserving, and sustainably managing dryland forests and mangroves in the affected countries. The UN Strategic Plan² for Forests, which was adopted in 2017 by the UN Economic and Social Council and by the UN General Assembly, features a set of six Global Forest Goals (GFGs) and 26 associated targets to be reached by 2030, including a target to increase forest area by three per cent worldwide. Additionally, the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and Land-Neutrality Programme of the UNCCD provide a comprehensive basis to facilitate such collaboration.

The side event will provide an important opportunity to discuss the challenges and threats to dryland forests, and low forest cover countries, and share information and best practices to protect dryland forests. In the interest of assisting the affected countries to overcome the challenges, the side event will make concrete suggestions for advancing the protection, conservation, and sustainable management of dryland forests, and addressing the needs of low forest cover countries through a quadruple partnership between UNFFS, UNCBD, UNCCD, and the interested countries, including Saudi Arabia.

III. Objectives

The side event will be an opportunity for UNFF members, UN entities and experts to discuss opportunities for increased international cooperation in support of dryland forest conservation, restoration and sustainable management and utilization. The programme will focus on the contributions of dryland forests to the agreements and objectives under the three Rio Conventions and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030, as well as associated challenges and opportunities. The discussions during the side event will focus on the following guiding questions:

- Why are dryland forests important? What are their main contributions in terms of livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, biodiversity, and climate action?
- What are the contributions of dryland forests to the agreements and objectives under the three Rio Conventions and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030?
- How can countries and partners enhance the conservation, sustainable management and utilization of dryland forests? And what can be done to address the needs and concerns of low forest cover countries?
- What are the opportunities at the global level for countries to restore, conserve and sustainably manage dryland forests, including for mobilizing the financial and other resources required?

² ECOSOC Resolution 2017/4 <https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=E/RES/2017/4>

IV. Programme, Modalities, and Outcome of the Side Event

The side event will include the following opening remarks and keynote speeches:

13:00 -13:20 Opening Session (4 min. each):

- Introduction by moderator Dr. Juliette Biao, Director of UNFF Secretariat
- Remarks by Dr. Khaled Alabdulkader, CEO of NCVC
- Remarks by Mr. Ismail Belen, Chair of UNFF20 Bureau
- Remarks by Ms. Birguy Lamizana, Chief of Global Policy, Advocacy and Regional Cooperation, UNCCD

13:20-13:25 Video on Dryland Forests

13:30-13:51 Keynote speakers (7 min. each):

- Dr. Hosny El Lakany, Professor at University of British Columbia, Canada
- Dr. Rahma Jrais, Professor at King Khalid University
- Mr. Fritjof Boerstler, Senior Natural Resources Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and Lead of the GEF 7 Sustainable Forest Management Impact Program on Dryland Sustainable Landscapes

13:55-14:25 Moderated debate

14:25 -14:30 Concluding remarks by the moderator

The discussions will be moderated by Dr. Juliette Biao, Director of the UNFF Secretariat. Following the keynote speech and the presentations, the Moderator will open the floor for interactive discussions involving the participants and the presenters. The interactive discussion will focus on the above-mentioned questions, and the presentations made by the speakers. There will be no pre-determined list of speakers for the interactive discussions. The side event will be held in-person at the UNCCD COP16 venue. The discussions will be in English. Before closing the side event, the Moderator will share an oral summary of key points raised during the side event. A short report on the discussions of the side event will also be included in the relevant official document of UNFF20 for consideration of the Forum.

V. Side Event Coordinator

For further information, please contact Ms. Nadine Souto at UNFF Secretariat at: nadine.souto@un.org, and Mr. Eduardo Mansur, at National Center for Vegetation Cover, Development and Combatting Desertification of Saudi Arabia (NCVC) at: meduardo@ncvc.gov.sa.