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Item 3.1 of the provisional agenda*

**UPDATE ON THE
GLOBAL FOREST RESOURCES ASSESSMENT**

Report submitted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Note by the Executive Secretary

1. At the request of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Executive Secretary is circulating herewith, for the information of participants in the ninth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA), a document entitled "Update on the global forest resources assessment", prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
2. The document is being circulated in the language and the form in which it was received by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

* UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/9/1.

**Information Document for the Ninth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on
Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA-9)
Montreal, Canada, 10-14 November 2003**

**UPDATE ON THE
GLOBAL FOREST RESOURCES ASSESSMENT**



**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy**

1. Introduction

Since 1947, FAO has carried out Global Forest Resources Assessments (FRA) together with partners and countries at approximately decadal intervals. The assessments have evolved over time, following the growing awareness and mainstreaming of forestry issues on the international agenda. Consequently, during the first decades, the FRA's focussed mainly on a sustainable timber supply. Gradually, however, the wide range of environmental, economic and social aspects of forestry have been incorporated (Holmgren & Persson 2002). For example, FRA 1980 gave an early and comprehensive picture of global deforestation, and FRA 1990 refined this knowledge considerably.

The latest report – FRA 2000 – included thematic reports on, e.g., deforestation, forest fires, biological diversity, forest management, biomass and carbon, wood supply, planted forests, non-wood forest products, protected areas and trees outside of forests. In addition, FRA 2000 provided an overview of forest resources and management for all sub-regions and countries, presented as country profiles on the FAO website (FAO 2001).

FRA 2000 concluded, among many other things, that forest area changes – both positive and negative – continues to be high (Figure 1). The overall loss of forests was slightly lower in the 1990s compared with the 1980s, but several tropical regions still display a rapid rate of deforestation. But there are also positive signs. Planted forests and trees provide an increasing share of forest benefits. Protected areas and areas under formal management are increasing. The role of non-wood forest products is increasingly acknowledged, as is the role of forests in poverty alleviation and food security. Political processes to support sustainable forestry are strengthened, such as the nine international/regional processes on Criteria and Indicators (C&I) for Sustainable Forest Management.

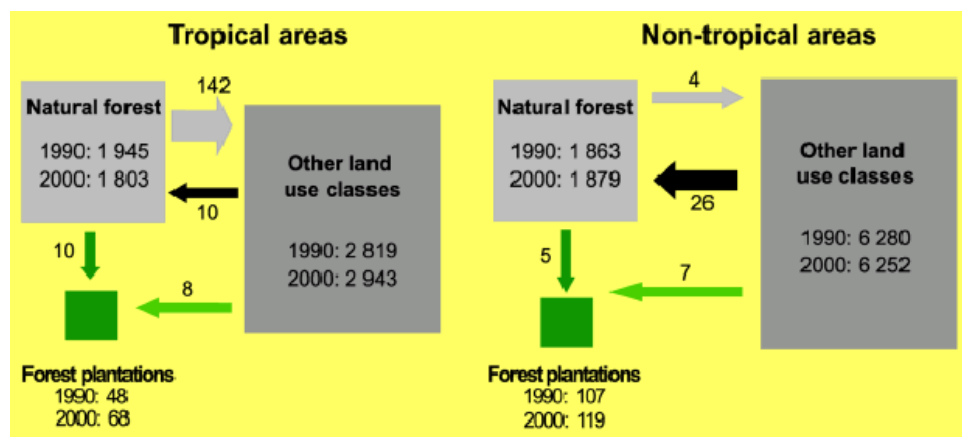


Figure 1. Global area changes during the 1990's. Source: FRA 2000.

Another conclusion from FRA 2000 was that the information and knowledge situation remains poor. Only a small minority of countries have forest monitoring systems in place that can provide information about social, economic and environmental trends in forestry. For developing countries in particular – despite the great need to support national and international policy processes – current and reliable information on forestry is not available. While investments in forestry information was commonly supported by development aid programmes a few decades ago, the interest seem to have weakened considerably. One reason

seems to be an over-reliance on remote sensing to provide the information required. However, the diverse and complex information needs call for more sophisticated and relevant methods, based on systematic data collection in the field. As a follow-up to FRA 2000, FAO has therefore initiated a programme to actively support National Forest Assessments, where not only biophysical resources, but also management, uses and users of forests are considered (FAO 2003c).

2. The global Forest Resources Assessment process

The global FRA's are carried out within FAO's fundamental mandates to be a neutral forum for its member countries, and to collect analyse and disseminate information about food, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and related subjects. The FRA process is one component within FAO's overall work to report on global land resources, management, products, services and trade.

As for other reporting processes led by FAO, guidance and directions are given by FAO's governing bodies. In the case of FRA, the main reference is to the Committee on Forestry (COFO)¹ which meets bi-annually at FAO headquarters.

Building on the mandate given by FAO's constitution and its governing bodies, the global FRA process includes communication on an official level with countries to obtain the most recent and reliable information on forests and forestry. Each country is asked to nominate a National Correspondent to FRA, who functions both as advisor to the FRA secretariat, and as focal point for the national reporting to FRA. A global meeting of National Correspondents will be held in Rome 17-21 November to initiate the reporting phase to FRA 2005.

In addition, the global FRA process includes an advisory group of experts in leading FRA-related positions in national and international bodies. FAO and partners also regularly organize international expert consultations to guide the FRA process, notably the series of meetings since 1987 in the Finnish town of Kotka.

The global FRA process is transparent and its results traceable. Reported country information is referenced to national sources, and the analyses applied are documented. References, analyses and results are published in detail, in print and on the FAO website www.fao.org/forestry. In addition to country information, FRA includes independent studies of forest developments, e.g. the remote sensing survey of tropical forest cover changes in FRA 2000, which complemented the country reports.

The FAO-led FRA has become a *de-facto* benchmark for global forest information. While several other initiatives produce global-level information on forests, few have the formal backing and complete coverage. However, there are alternative views. Following the release of FRA 2000, several commentaries suggested that FAO (and thereby countries) downplay the destruction of forest environments (e.g. WRI 2001, Leahy 2003). Analysts have also provided differing views of the forest development (e.g. Lomborg 2001), or used the science

¹ The Committee on Forestry (COFO) is the most important of the FAO Forestry Statutory Bodies. The biennial sessions of COFO (held at FAO headquarters in Rome) bring together heads of forest services and other senior government officials, usually representing more than 100 countries, to identify emerging policy and technical issues, to seek solutions and to advise FAO and others on appropriate action. Other international organizations and, increasingly, non-governmental groups participate in COFO.

community as the reporting platform such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Anon. 2003). The FRA process has, however, proven to be long-term and neutral, and to bring together common knowledge of global forest resources in an agreeable and official way.

3. Forest Resources Assessment 2005

Following FRA 2000, the process to design and implement the next global assessment has been intense. In July 2002, an expert consultation – Kotka IV – took the first steps by outlining objectives and principles for the global assessments (FAO 2002a). These included the necessity to maintain a strong and transparent link with official national level information – the global assessment being, in essence, the sum of national assessments. Kotka IV also recommended to link with the Criteria and Indicator (C&I) processes for Sustainable Forest Management.. Building on the concept that the FRA should address the full range of benefits from forests, Kotka IV recommended that the global FRA build on common themes in the C&I processes, i.e.:

- Extent of forests
- Forest health and vitality
- Biodiversity
- Productive functions of forests
- Protective functions of forests
- Socio-economic functions

The linkages between FRA and C&I processes was confirmed in an international conference on criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management in February 2003 (FAO 2003a).

When COFO met in March 2003, it endorsed the Kotka IV recommendations and urged FAO to produce an updated global FRA by 2005 as seen in the following excerpt from the COFO report (FAO 2003b):

“46. The Committee recommended that FAO focus on its mandated role as a source of global forestry information and that FAO continue to give high priority to forest resources assessments, emphasizing the importance of strengthening national capacities to collect and analyze information about forests, and of improving compatibility between national, regional and international assessments. It recognized that this work needed to reflect the range of national circumstances in forest cover, use and management. The Committee endorsed the major recommendations of an international expert consultation on forest resources assessments (Kotka IV), including the establishment of an advisory group on global forest resources assessments; the importance of linking these assessments with criteria for sustainable forest management; and the need for an updated global FRA report in 2005.”

The specification of methods, variables, terms and definition to be used in FRA 2005 are ongoing. Sixteen global standardized tables have been designed, based on the common themes above. In addition a thematic national reporting to complement the global tables is envisioned. The design is taking into consideration the needs to link with other reporting processes and the expectations to reduce the overall reporting burden on countries. FAO (2003c) contains the detailed specification of FRA 2005.

Following the design phase and a global meeting of FRA National Correspondents in November 2003, the continued work will focus on supporting countries to submit national reports during 2004. Assistance to developing countries will include regional workshops and in-country work to help compile and analyse available national information. In 2005, the national reports will be compiled into a global update on forest resources – FRA 2005. Thematic reports, e.g. on forests and water, are also being planned.

4. Linkages to other international processes

- The global FRA process is linked with a large number of international forest-related processes. These include:
- The nine processes on Criteria & Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management, which generate information requirements at the political level. These requirements are important as they contribute to the specification of the global FRA, and provide a strong link between FRA and the SFM concept. The SFM objective, and the related Ecosystem approach of the CBD, provides a good target for FRA activities at international and national levels.
- The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) is tasked to seek ways to streamline forest-related reporting and thereby reduce the reporting burden on countries. FAO works together with ITTO, and the secretariats of UNFF, CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD to achieve this. In this context, FRA becomes a potential source of quality-controlled information for the conventions, and synergies in reporting may be found.
- UNEP's Global Environmental Outlook reports draw on FRA for its thematic reporting on forests.
- The recently launched process to harmonize forest-related definitions (FAO 2002b,c) draws from FRA specifications, along with terms and definitions specified by other processes.
- The FRA process is also connected to the broader UN Millennium Development Goals. One of the key indicators identified for the MDG is the change in forest area by country, which is provided by FRA.

5. Conclusions

- The Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) is an established neutral and official process to generate information on forests for all countries, building on mandate from and formal participation of countries.
- FRA includes a broad range of information on forest resources, their management, uses (benefits) and users, and its results have become a *de facto* global benchmark on these topics.
- The next global FRA report is scheduled for 2005.
- FRA has evolved over time and continues to incorporate emerging global forestry issues. The linkages and harmonization with other forest-related processes and reporting are ongoing features of the FRA. Currently, the linkages with C&I processes, and the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and its members, is particularly important. Synergies between forest-related reporting are sought, and expected benefits are reduced overlaps and reduced reporting burden on countries.

- The FRA output is potentially useful for other forest-related processes, including the CBD.

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