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Item 21 of the provisional agenda \*

**FOREST BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

***Report on the Expert Meeting on Harmonization of Forest-related Definitions for Use by Various Stakeholders, Rome, 23-25 January 2002***

*Note by the Executive Secretary*

1. The Conference of the Parties, at its fifth meeting, decided to establish an Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Forest Biological Diversity to assist the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) in its work on forest biological diversity (decision V/4). At its seventh meeting, SBSTTA, in its recommendation VII/6, adopted proposed elements for an expanded programme of work on forest biological diversity. SBSTTA also recommended that the Conference of the Parties, at its sixth meeting, takes note of the Expert Meeting on Harmonization of Forest-related Definitions for Use by Various Stakeholders, to be held in Rome in January 2002, under the aegis of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Center for International Forestry Research, and other partners, and requests that the findings be presented to the Conference of the Parties at its sixth meeting (recommendation VII/6, para. 5).

2. Accordingly, the Executive Secretary is circulating herewith, for the information of participants in the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the report of the Expert Meeting on Harmonization of Forest-related Definitions for Use by Various Stakeholders, held in Rome from 23 to 25 January 2002, prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

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3. The document is being circulated in the form and language in which it was received by the Secretariat.







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## 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties of the Convention of Biological Diversity

### INFORMATION NOTE

## EXPERT MEETING ON HARMONIZATION OF FOREST-RELATED DEFINITIONS FOR USE BY VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS ROME, 23-25 JANUARY 2002

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The need for a common understanding and harmonization of forest-related definitions was elaborated by the Resumed Sixth Session of the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC (Bonn, 16-27 June 2001), the Twentieth Session of the FAO Council (Rome, 19-23 June 2001), the FAO Committee on Forestry at its fifteenth session (Rome, 12-16 March 2001), the FAO Committee on Agriculture at its sixteenth session (Rome, 26-30 March 2001) and the first session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (New York, 11-12 June 2001).

Subsequently, an Expert Meeting on Harmonizing Forest-related Definitions for Use by Various Stakeholders was jointly organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in collaboration with the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), at FAO Headquarters, in Rome, from 23 to 25 January 2002. The meeting was attended by fifty-two participants.

The objective of the meeting was to start a process to review, improve, where feasible, and interrelate forest-related definitions, in particular *biome-specific forest definitions*, and definitions for the terms *forest degradation* and *devegetation*.

The meeting was not intended to question decisions taken by Parties to the Conventions, neither did it intend to interfere with ongoing processes. The purpose of this meeting and its follow-up process was rather to look at the subject matter from a purely technical point of view and to complement work done by other bodies and processes.

Much global or regional information on forest resources is derived from national data. FAO has, therefore, developed forest-related definitions for national inputs to globally aggregated forest assessments and outlook studies. The Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have developed forest-related definitions for use in climate change issues involving land use, land-use change and forestry. Other organizations have developed such definitions for other purposes, such as assessing forest resources or monitoring biological diversity in forests. There is a need to improve the compatibility and consistency of definitions in order to permit comparability and thus improve the quality and usefulness of forest information, increase the synergy among conventions and international processes; and use more effectively the scarce available resources for assessment, monitoring, reporting and verification.

There is a need for globally and regionally aggregated information on forest resources and forest ecosystems to:

- Define the concept of, and monitor progress toward, sustainable forest management;
- Assess the role of forests in climate change;
- Assess the attributes of forest ecosystems and their changes which affect biological diversity, conservation and other functions;
- Analyse the social, economic and environmental roles of forests.

The type and level of information differs among users but consistent, comparable or even convertible definitions, facilitate its exchange.

Harmonized forest-related definitions will help to reduce the reporting burden on countries, thus reducing costs and, in some cases, also improving the quality of the information. Ambiguities and misunderstandings could be avoided.

It is thus expected that the harmonization of definitions will help streamline action in the forestry and agriculture sectors, and that it will also facilitate the implementation of the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

## **2 CONCLUSIONS**

### **2.1 Need for Harmonization and Reporting Requirements**

Forest-related definitions are used internationally or are being developed under various international conventions and fora. These encompass, *inter alia*, UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD, UNFF and various other bodies to which countries have reporting obligations, including FAO and International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). Different reporting requirements represent a considerable burden for the countries, and particularly developing countries have difficulties to meet them. Differing definitions aggravate this burden.

Various conventions and stakeholders have their own objectives and therefore different information needs. For example, the definitions agreed upon after extensive negotiation for Articles 3.3 and 3.4 of the Kyoto Protocol (KP) are highly context-specific and, to a large extent, related to the role of forests in climate change and, particularly, to carbon accounting, reporting and verification. Thus clear definitions were required for terms such as ‘forest’, ‘afforestation’, ‘reforestation’, ‘deforestation’ and ‘forest management’ to specify the land areas and activities affecting carbon accounting.

The CBD has not included the term ‘forest’ in its Art. 2 (use of terms). The Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Forest Biological Diversity (AHTEG) considers the FAO (FAO 2000) definition of ‘forest’ useful, but notes that many other useful definitions also exist. The fact that ‘forest’ has been defined in many ways is in itself an indication of the diversity of forests and forest ecosystems in the world and of the diversity of human approaches to manage and conserve them.

According to AHTEG, a forest is a land area of more than 0.5 ha, with a tree canopy cover of more than 10 percent, which is not primarily under agricultural or other land use. In the case of young forests, or regions where tree growth is climatically suppressed, the trees should be capable of reaching a height of 5 m *in situ* and of meeting the canopy cover requirement. The CBD treats forests as a functional ecosystem unit which should be conserved, used sustainably, and the benefits derived

from it should be shared equitably. In this sense, CBD's view of forests is function and ecosystem oriented.

The UNCCD views forest and wooded land as a land component within the integrated management of natural resources. Forest definitions should help to understand better causes, factors, state and impact of land cover degradation and the effectiveness of remedial measures, which are taken at various levels, to combat desertification.

The objectives of the UNFF's programme of work related to Monitoring, Assessment and Reporting include

- (a) enhance common understanding of concepts, terms and definitions;
- (b) streamlining of reporting requirements; and
- (c) reducing reporting burden on countries and providing meaningful, reliable and cost-effective information on forests.

The reporting needs under the UNFF focus on progress in the implementation of the IPF/IFF Proposals for Action, progress towards sustainable management of all types of forests, and the review of the effectiveness of the UNFF process.

FAO has a fundamental long-established task to compile and produce global baseline statistics on the forest sector, including forest resources assessments. Global assessments are made in participation with countries, applying harmonized terms and definitions. The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2000 (FRA 2000) was published in 2001 and was the first to have consistent definitions of forest and forest-change processes, applied by all countries. Agreement on terminology illustrates the commitment of participating countries to achieve comparable global information.

Countries will continue to develop and use their own definitions for their forests. These can be made compatible and consistent – also over time – with the international definitions. The experience with FRA 2000, where national classifications and definitions were mapped into globally homogenous classes for all countries, shows that harmonized definitions are feasible.

ITTO recognizes the need for harmonization of definitions in the following three areas:

- (a) for the criteria and indicator processes;
- (b) for country reporting on progress towards sustainable forest management, taking into account the reporting requirements of different organizations; and
- (c) for the ongoing development of guidelines for the restoration of degraded high forests, the management of secondary forests and the rehabilitation of degraded forest lands in tropical regions, especially as regards the definitions of degradation, restoration, rehabilitation and with regard to different forest types such as primary forest, modified forest, disturbed forest, degraded forest and secondary forest.

Coordination between the various international bodies in developing definitions and reporting requirements has been inadequate. This has resulted in inconsistent and sometimes conflicting definitions. The FRA definitions are not fully consistent with other international processes. Varying interpretations of 'reforestation' in the Kyoto Protocol have burdened negotiations about the role of forest carbon sinks. Conflicts also arise because of differing views of forests and forest management between geographic regions, or because various interest groups focus on alternative functions of forests.

The Meeting concluded that there is a need to harmonize definitions which could help reduce the burden of reporting on countries and even improve the quality of information.



## **2.2 Desirable Characteristics of Forest-related Definitions**

To be useful, internationally applicable forest-related definitions should be:

- clear, concise, objective and unambiguous in the context used;
- information-rich (predictive, useful and effective for the intended use) and not driven by exceptions;
- practical and easily applicable in all countries so that data collection, meaningful reporting and verification are possible and cost-efficient;
- easily adaptable to national systems;
- consistent over time and harmonized over space (and international process);
- seamless with related non-forest definitions to allow their consistent use in various international fora;
- constructed or harmonized in such a way that the current reporting requirements from countries are reduced.

The purpose of harmonizing-forest related definitions would be to reduce the costs of data collection, reporting and verification; avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings; and improve functional coordination between international conventions and other arrangements.

As a general rule, existing definitions should be adopted. Whenever necessary, they should be adapted, improved and related to each other.

## **2.3 State and Change Processes**

The forest-related definitions dealt with in detail at the Meeting formed part of an overall classification of land (state) and of change processes occurring within and between land classes. There is a fundamental necessity to consider the complete set of generic land classes that include all lands. Such a generic classification would provide a consistent framework for developing and applying more specific definitions under various conventions and for various uses of information, while providing a common baseline for general land classes. These classes may be based on land cover, land use, their combination, or additional attributes and functions. The relevant terms related to forest state include forest, non-forest, other wooded land and trees outside of forests. Terms related to change over time include afforestation, reforestation, natural expansion of forest, revegetation, deforestation, devegetation, natural regeneration of forests, forest improvement and forest degradation. Further, the terms related to the agent or mode of change (such as natural events, directly or indirectly human-induced activities, as well as forest management) also need to be addressed.

One approach in setting up a framework for forest-related definitions could be to create a system of entities with continuously varying attributes (e.g., crown cover, height, naturalness, etc.), from which any number of objective-oriented classifications can be derived and adapted for application within a specific context. Such a system could also encompass change processes and the various functions affected by them (climate change mitigation, maintenance of biological diversity, provision of wood and non-wood products, soil and water conservation and other services). Each function to be considered could be characterized by using appropriate criteria, indicators, reference points or proxies, if indicators cannot be measured directly. Developing definitions for forest functions is a particular challenge, as functions are not necessarily related to a specified area.

Reference points may be needed for such concepts as “sustainably managed forests” or “healthy forests”. The former may be derived from the Criteria and Indicators for sustainable forest management that have been developed under various international and regional processes.

## **2.4 Forest as a Land-Use Class**

Although land cover is an important feature in defining land classes and changes between them, the Meeting recognized that forest definitions should distinguish tree-covered land that is primarily used for agriculture or urban environments. In this context, it was noted that the FAO-UNEP Land Cover Classification System (LCCS) is a comprehensive methodology for description, characterization, classification and comparison of most land cover anywhere in the world at any scale and at different levels of detail. It is a useful tool to allow rational use and easy exchange of land cover information between different countries, institutions and end users. Land-cover classes rely on the combination of a set of independent diagnostic attributes allowing the user to define a wide variety of different land-cover features within a standardized but flexible framework.

The Meeting discussed the following classes related to the state of the land: forest, other wooded land and other land, including trees outside forest. The following change processes between these land classes were discussed: deforestation, afforestation, natural expansion of forests, reforestation, natural regeneration, forest degradation, forest improvement, devegetation and revegetation.

There is a need to adapt threshold values for forest definitions to improve their relevance and applicability in different local conditions or forest types. There is also a need to develop guidance for countries on how to select those threshold values to ensure comparability and consistency, if the definitions themselves cannot be harmonized. Threshold values are particularly important for forest area and carbon accounting, and they should consider the resilience of the forest under different situations and for different functions.

## **2.5 Comparative Framework**

A comparative framework for harmonizing forest-related definitions could be a matrix where the definitions of a number of concepts and terms can be listed, described, compared and related to different uses (international conventions, FRA, etc.) and stakeholders. The IPCC Special Report on Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry provides a useful starting point, and some of its elements were further elaborated upon by the Expert Meeting. It was also suggested that a set of functions should be developed to relate and, if possible, convert definitions.

The Meeting identified a number of core terms for which internationally used definitions are already largely compatible. They could, however, be improved to make them more consistent and directly comparable. These core terms include, *inter alia*, forest, forest land (as land use), land-use change and degradation.

## **2.6 Definitions of Forest, Afforestation, Reforestation and Deforestation**

Definition of forest is fundamental to how afforestation, reforestation and deforestation are defined by various parties. FRA 2000 and the Marrakech Accord of the UNFCCC (COP-7) have slightly different interpretations of what is forest even though they share common elements (a threshold value for tree cover, tree height and minimum area of land). However, there are key differences:

- 1) The FAO definition sets a single threshold for canopy cover (10%), height (5 m) and minimum area (0.5 ha), whereas the KP definition provides for a range in these values within which a country may choose an appropriate threshold to suit to its own circumstances. However, Parties are required to justify in their reporting that such values are consistent with the

information that has been reported historically to FAO or other international bodies and, if they differ, to explain why and how such values were chosen.

- 2) The FAO definition specifically excludes orchards, agroforestry and urban forests, whereas these are not explicitly excluded in the forest definition of the Marrakech Accord. However, the latter definition assigns any system of practices on land on which agricultural crops are grown to the activity "cropland management". If trees form part of such a system, they are thus excluded from forest.

**Afforestation**, as applied by FRA 2000, is the conversion of non-forest into forest as the result of direct human action through planting or seeding. Afforestation explicitly excludes natural expansion of forest to non-forest land, whereas deforestation does not distinguish natural loss of forest from that caused by human action. Therefore, the FRA definition of afforestation is not truly symmetric with that of deforestation. Taken together, afforestation and natural expansion of forests represent all changes from non-forest to forest according to the FRA definition.

For Article 3.3 of the Kyoto Protocol, afforestation is defined in the Marrakech Accord as "the conversion of land that has not been forested for at least 50 years to forested land through planting, seeding and/or human-induced promotion of natural seed sources". The term 'forested land' is not defined, and it is unclear whether young forests which are not yet firmly established are included or not. Similarly, the expression "promotion of natural seed sources" would exclude other forms of regeneration, such as vegetative propagation, which may not have been the intent of the negotiators. FRA does not make any qualification regarding the means of afforestation (through seeds or vegetative propagation).

Both definitions of afforestation are compatible in the sense that they require human action and crossing of the forest/non-forest threshold. They differ in that the Kyoto Protocol requires that the land has not been forested within the previous 50 years, whereas the FRA definition does not. The FRA thresholds are fixed, whereas the Kyoto Protocol allows them to be chosen by the Annex I countries from within a range.

The treatment of young forests is compatible in the two cases. However, the KP definition explicitly includes young forests, whereas FRA 2000 considers as afforested only young forest stands that have been successfully established, but may not yet have crossed the applicable thresholds.

The FRA definition of **reforestation** implies active establishment (through seeding or planting) of forest on land previously forested but temporarily below the forest threshold due to harvesting or disturbances. Natural regeneration on forest lands is defined and accounted separately. Lands undergoing reforestation or natural regeneration (according to FRA) continue to be forest throughout. Neither of these transition processes involves a change in land-use class.

The KP definition (Article 3.3) defines reforestation as conversion of land that was forested but had been converted to non-forested land. For the first commitment period, reforestation is restricted to land that did not contain forest on 31 December 1989. The definition uses three undefined terms: non-forested land, forested land and land that did not contain forests. Reforestation, as defined by the Kyoto Protocol, is accounted as afforestation under FRA 2000 since the land was not previously forested. The current definitions of reforestation by FRA and the KP are therefore incompatible from a land-use point of view.

The terms afforestation and reforestation have not yet been defined under Article 12 of the KP referring to the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). If different thresholds are used from those

under Article 3.3, this could have major implications for land area reported as afforested or deforested. The requirement of meeting sustainable development objectives is also likely to introduce additional conditions. The KP may exclude credits for afforestation and reforestation activities that do not meet sustainable development objectives, as defined by the Party.

The Kyoto Protocol defines **deforestation** as "direct human-induced conversion of forested land to non-forested land". Parties must report how they differentiate deforestation from harvesting or natural disturbance that is followed by re-establishment of a forest. In FRA, deforestation is "the conversion of forest to another land-use class or the long-term reduction of the tree cover below the minimum 10 percent threshold". Both definitions refer to non-temporary (long-term or permanent) change from forest to non-forest. The definitions differ in the sense that deforestation under FRA can also be a change in land use/forest use to other use, and it includes both human-induced and natural causes.

Both definitions leave the time period for a "temporary" unstocked state undefined. Another source of inconsistency is that the KP definition of deforestation excludes natural permanent forest loss. This could be significant due to landslides, flooding, volcanic eruptions or other natural disasters, and even climate change.

It is important to note that, in a given country, minimum areas defined for forest (and non-forest), afforestation and deforestation should be consistent and preferably equal. If a forest patch falls below the minimum area chosen, it needs to be reported as deforested. The minimum area requirement is also important as it influences possibilities and costs of monitoring by remote sensing.

## **2.7 Definitions of Forest Degradation**

Forest degradation is a change process which FAO defines as "changes within the forest which negatively affect the structure or function of the stand and site, and thereby lower the capacity to supply products and/or services". The CBD defines a degraded forest as a state which delivers a reduced supply of goods and services from the given site and maintains only limited biological diversity. Such a forest may have lost its structure, species composition or productivity normally associated with the natural forest type expected at that site. ITTO (in preparation) applies the state concept to degradation referring to all those forests or forest lands that have been altered beyond the normal effects of natural processes through human activities or natural disasters, such as fire, landslides, etc.

All these existing definitions of degradation are largely compatible, and a generic common definition could be developed without greatly disrupting the existing use of the term. However, the available definitions may be inadequate because they do not take into account the relative levels of resilience in different forest types. Neither are structural changes related to biological diversity considered. Natural forest and plantations might require differentiated criteria. Indicators would be needed for resilience of forest types and such changed structures of forest which indicate degradation. It was noted that degradation is not always human-induced, as it can also take place for natural reasons (e.g., nutrient leaching).

Forest improvement describes the reverse process of forest degradation. Other terms for this purpose may, however, be preferred, such as aggradation.

The various definitions of degradation (and improvement) leave several open issues related to the reference point (initial state, definition of the appropriate set of goods and services, time frame of the change, etc.). Further considerations include whether the process is human-induced or natural, and whether it should cover both discrete events and slow, chronic degradation.

A core definition of forest degradation should preferably provide

- the reference point;
- an agreed set of variables; and
- indicators (and their proxies if necessary) to measure the change of a forest (ecosystem).

A negative change in any indicator (beyond a certain threshold value) would represent an element of degradation. Both process and state definitions may be applied. A generic, composite index for degradation, based on a weighted combination of indicators and/or their changes over time, could be a template for international application. Weighting would be justified, as various negative changes would not have an equal impact on forest functions. Additional elements could be added or singled out, depending on the particular interests related to the forest (e.g., carbon density even though it may already form part of the composite index). The use of proxies (e.g., crown cover percentage) will continue, but more work is needed in validating their appropriateness and translating them into relevant information on the specific aspects of degradation.

There is a need to review all existing definitions and seek for stakeholder views on the generic definition of forest degradation and its application. Any composite measures or additional sustainability or context-specific measures should be checked in practice to ensure that they can be assessed at reasonable cost and used for national reporting. In addition, such measures should not lead to pervert situations where e.g. unsustainably managed forests exhibit increased carbon density.

## **2.8 Biome-specific Definitions**

Due to the difficulties of applying global definitions to the highly variable biophysical and socio-economic conditions prevailing in the world's forests, COP-7 of the UNFCCC has asked its Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technical Advice (SBSTA) to explore the possible application of biome-specific definitions that could capture important aspects which are not identified when using globally applicable definitions. Were a biome-based approach adopted, the participants of the Meeting felt that 'biomes' should be defined 'bottom-up' (i.e., as a specified set of vegetation types) rather than on a climatic basis.

The Meeting also concluded that biomes are probably less useful as a basis for different definitional thresholds than forest or vegetation types. The concept of biocentric biome is not necessarily compatible with the actual land use and the way forests are managed and utilized. As many countries include several biomes, using biome-specific definitions would increase, rather than decrease, the reporting burden. Socio-economic parameters and land-use systems cross-cut the limits of biomes, which is another complicating factor. A tiered approach, based on a common definition of forest at the top level (e.g., an ecosystem-based definition) and biome or forest type-specific definitions at the next level, could address the problem. Another option is classification of forest categories according to the degree of anthropogenic influence (protected natural forest, managed natural forest, plantation, agroforestry, etc.).

COP-7 left open the possibility of applying biome-specific forest definitions for the second and subsequent commitment periods. However, a choice may have to be made earlier, when applicable definitions are agreed upon in the context of the CDM (Art. 12).

## **2.9 Other Initiatives**

The Meeting took note of the following related activities:

- SBSTA of the UNFCCC is to consider applying biome-specific forest definitions;

- SBSTA of the UNFCCC must also develop forest-related definitions for the CDM (Article 12 of the KP);
- IPCC has been requested to develop definitions for degradation and devegetation;
- ITTO is working on defining degraded and secondary forests;
- The World Conservation Union (IUCN), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and CIFOR are developing a typology of plantations;
- IUFRO is working on terminology;
- UNEP and IUFRO are working on how low-forest cover should be defined.

### **3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **3.1. Definitions**

3.1.1 The current definitions related to the Kyoto Protocol and the FRA are largely compatible with each other in spite of some inconsistencies. In order to improve the comparability between the two sets of definitions, the Meeting recommended the following:

- Parties to the Protocol may wish to consider, in the second or subsequent commitment period, dropping the requirement for a 50-year non-unforest condition for afforestation. This would eliminate the need for a separate definition of reforestation and bring the KP afforestation figures into closer agreement with the FRA results;
- FAO should take action to ensure that all the relevant bodies are aware of the final version of forest-related definitions of FRA 2000;
- FAO may wish to consider expanding the FRA definition of afforestation (i) to include assisted regeneration not involving direct seeding or planting, and (ii) to differentiate direct human-induced deforestation and permanent forest loss due to other causes. This would make the FRA data compatible with the needs of the Kyoto Protocol.

3.1.2 In deciding about adopting the AHTEG definition of forests, the CBD may wish to verify that it is using the FRA 2000 definitions of afforestation and reforestation correctly.

#### **3.2 Follow-up Action**

The Expert Meeting made the following recommendations for follow-up action:

- i) The process of harmonizing forest-related definitions should be continued and urgently completed under the umbrella of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), with FAO acting as the Secretariat, in cooperation with IPCC, IUFRO, CIFOR and the Secretariats of the CBD and UNFCCC.
- ii) Other stakeholders should be invited to participate in the process, including those who have not yet been part of the process (e.g., International Labor Organization).
- iii) The results of the Meeting (the Meeting Report and the Discussion Paper) should be conveyed by FAO to the interested parties, including the international and regional C&I processes. In particular the following meetings should be informed: COP-6 of CBD, IPCC meetings on Good Practice Guidance and the Kotka IV meeting on FRA.
- iv) A Task Force of knowledgeable experts should be formed without delay to plan and implement identified follow-up work.
- v) FAO, in cooperation with the Task Force, should prepare a comprehensive analytical framework, including compilation and analysis of similarities and differences between different definitions and their relationships, in order to facilitate the follow-up process.
- vi) The draft report on the framework should be submitted to the participants of the Meeting and other experts for review and comment. Based on the comments received, the final version would be prepared.
- vii) A second Expert Meeting should be arranged, preferably in June 2002. The Meeting should review the report on the framework and decide on further action that may be required to harmonize forest-related definitions.

The full report is available at FAO's webpage under: <http://www.fao.org/forestry/climate>.

