FOURTH SESSION OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL FORUM ON FORESTS: 31 JANUARY – 11 FEBRUARY 2000

The fourth session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF-4) will convene today at UN Headquarters in New York and will continue to meet until 11 February 2000. Delegates to IFF-4 have before them the task of finalizing conclusions and proposals for action on the elements of its programme of work to be submitted to the eighth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in April 2000. The programme elements under consideration at IFF-4 are: promoting and facilitating implementation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests’ (IPF) proposals for action; monitoring progress in implementation of the IPF proposals; the need for financial resources; trade and environment; transfer of environmentally sound technologies to support sustainable forest management; issues needing further clarification; forest-related work of international and regional organizations and under existing instruments; and international arrangements and mechanisms to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. The issues needing further clarification are: underlying causes of deforestation; traditional forest-related knowledge; forest conservation and protected areas; forest research; valuation of forest goods and services; economic instruments; future supply of and demand for wood and non-wood forest products; and assessment, monitoring and rehabilitation of forest cover in environmentally critical areas.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE IFF

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON FORESTS: The UN Commission on Sustainable Development’s (CSD) open-ended ad hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) was established in 1995 to pursue consensus and coordinated proposals for action to support the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. The IPF focused on 12 programme elements under five chapter headings: implementation of United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) forest-related decisions; international cooperation in financial assistance and technology transfer; research, assessment and development of criteria and indicators (C&I) for sustainable forest management (SFM); trade and environment; and international organizations and multilateral institutions and instruments. Its objective was to submit final conclusions and policy recommendations to the CSD at its fifth session (CSD-5) in April 1997.

The IPF met four times between 1995-1997 and adopted a final report at its fourth session in February 1997, which it submitted to CSD-5. The report contained approximately 140 proposals for action under its 12 programme elements, including a call for continued intergovernmental forest policy dialogue. However, IPF delegates could not agree on a few major issues such as financial assistance and trade related matters, or whether to begin negotiations on a global forest convention. On these and other elements, the IPF forwarded a range of options to the CSD in its report. CSD-5 adopted the IPF’s report and forwarded a set of recommendations to the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) to conduct an overall review and appraisal of progress in implementing the UNCED agreements.

UNGASS: The UN General Assembly, at its nineteenth special session in June 1997, decided to continue the intergovernmental policy dialogue on forests through the establishment of an ad hoc open-ended Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) under the aegis of the CSD. In addition, the General Assembly decided that “the Forum should also identify the possible elements of and work toward consensus on international arrangements and mechanisms, for example, a legally-binding instrument.”

INTERGOVERNMENTAL FORUM ON FORESTS: The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through resolution 1997/65, established the IFF with a mandate to report on its programme of work to the CSD at its eighth session in 2000. The programme of work includes eight items grouped into three categories:

Category I includes (a), promoting and facilitating the implementation of the IPF’s proposals for action, and (b), reviewing, monitoring, and reporting on progress in the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.

Category II includes matters left pending on (a), the need for financial resources, (b), trade and environment, and (c), transfer of ESTs to support SFM. Category II(d) addresses issues arising from the IPF process needing further clarification, including: underlying causes of deforestation; assessment, monitoring and rehabilitation of forest cover in environmentally critical areas; forest conservation, including conservation in protected areas; identification and definition of global and regional research priorities; the use and application of a range of
economic instruments, including tax policies and land tenure arrangements as a means of promoting SFM; and future supply of and demand for wood and non-wood products and services. Category II(e) addresses forest-related work of international and regional organizations.

Under Category III, international arrangements and mechanisms, the IFF was instructed to identify elements, build a global consensus and engage in further action to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests, as well as identify the possible elements of and work toward consensus on international arrangements and mechanisms, for example, a legally-binding instrument on all types of forests. Based on the report submitted to CSD-8 and depending on the decision the CSD takes, the Forum may engage in further action on establishing an intergovernmental negotiation process on new arrangements and mechanisms.

IFF-1: The IFF held its organizational session (IFF-1) from 1-3 October 1997 in New York. Delegates agreed on the IFF’s programme of work, the schedule and allocation of programme elements for discussion at future sessions, the number, date and venue of future sessions, participation, and the organization of intersessional meetings or consultations.

IFF-2: Delegates to the second session of the IFF (IFF-2), held from 24 August - 4 September 1998 in Geneva, prepared draft conclusions and proposals for action on promoting and facilitating implementation and addressing certain matters left pending from the IPF. Delegates conducted substantive discussions on: promoting and facilitating implementation of the IPF’s proposals for action; forest-related work of international and regional organizations and existing instruments; trade and environment; and transfer of ESTs. Text on trade and environment and transfer of ESTs remained heavily bracketed. IFF-2 also conducted background discussion on monitoring progress in implementation of the IPF’s proposals for action, the need for financial resources, issues needing further clarification and international arrangements and mechanisms.

IFF-3: At the third session of the IFF (IFF-3), delegates conducted substantive discussion on monitoring progress in implementation of the IPF’s proposals for action, financial resources, issues needing further clarification, and international arrangements and mechanisms to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. On the issues needing further consideration, delegates elaborated on: underlying causes of deforestation; traditional forest-related knowledge; forest conservation and protected areas; valuation of forest products and services; economic instruments; future supply of and demand for wood and non-wood forest products and services; and assessment, monitoring and rehabilitation of forest cover in environmentally critical areas. Substantive discussions initiated at IFF-2 were continued on trade and environment and transfer of ESTs.

IFF-3 adopted Co-Chairs’ reports and compilation texts containing draft conclusions and proposals for action on these programme elements to be further considered at IFF-4 for further consideration. Texts on the need for financial resources, trade and environment and transfer of technology still contain bracketed text on contentious issues. Delegates also had before them documents on promoting and facilitating implementation and on forest-related work of international and regional organizations and under existing instruments, but did not discuss them.

INTERSESSIONAL PERIOD: Since IFF-3, a number of meetings addressing areas of the IFF programme of work were held, including:

* The Workshop on the Special Needs and Requirements of Developing Countries with Low Forest Cover (LFCCs) and Unique Types of Forest, was held in Tehran, Iran, from 4-8 October 1999. The meeting established the Tehran Process, an ongoing process designed to bring together LFCCs to address common needs. The long-term objectives of the process include: placing low forest cover on the agenda of future international deliberations; fostering national forest programmes in LFCCs; establishing linkages between LFCC actions and the conventions on desertification, biodiversity and climate change; identifying common areas of cooperative action; promoting research; formulating long-term approaches and strategies; and devising mechanisms to pursue implementation.

* The Workshop on Financing Sustainable Forest Management, hosted by the UNDP Programme on Forests, convened in Croydon, UK, from 11-13 October 1999. The Workshop explored potential financing and investment mechanisms and their constraints. Topics considered at the Workshop included the economics of SFM, core components of financing strategies, international and national financial flows, market-based instruments, public-private partnerships, options for an investment-promotion entity, and a global forest fund.

* The final meeting of the Costa Rica-Canada Initiative (CRCI) convened in Ottawa, Canada, from 6-10 December 1999. Sponsored by the Governments of Costa Rica and Canada, the three-stage Initiative aimed to identify possible elements and work toward a consensus on the usefulness of having international arrangements and mechanisms, for example, a legally-binding instrument on all types of forests (Category III). The Experts Meeting held from 22-26 February in San José, Costa Rica, marked the first stage of the Initiative and was followed up with seven regional meetings comprising the second stage. The objectives of the Initiative were to: provide the basis for informed decision-making on Category III at IFF-4; gain a better understanding of the arguments for and against three options for future arrangements and mechanisms -- existing legally-binding instruments, legally-binding instruments and legally non-binding instruments; and consider the possible outcomes of IFF-4 and the form(s) and mandate(s) of possible future arrangements. The Initiative resulted in a set of findings and "key messages" for IFF-4, which will be submitted to IFF-4. An additional regional meeting for the South Pacific on Category III was hosted by the Australian Government in Fiji.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: Delegates will convene in an opening Plenary session in Trusteeship Council at 10:00 am to hear opening remarks from UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette, UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer, UNDP Assistant Administrator Emi Watanabe and David Harcharik, Chair of the Interagency Task Force on Forests. IFF Co-Chairs, Ilkka Ristamäki (Finland) and Bagher Asadi (Iran) will also deliver opening remarks. The Plenary is then expected to elect officers and to adopt the agenda and the organization of work.

WORKING GROUPS: The Working Groups convened at IFF-2 and IFF-3 are expected to reconvene following Plenary. Working Group 1 is expected to continue discussions on promoting and facilitating implementation of the IPF proposals for action and monitoring progress in their implementation. Working Group 2 is expected to continue debates on the need for financial resources, trade and environment and transfer of ESTs to support SFM.