

UNFF21 Highlights: Monday, 11 May 2026

The opening day of the 21st session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF21) considered the new Global Forest Goals Report 2026 and discussed activities supporting the thematic priorities for the biennium 2025-2026 for implementing the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 (UNSPF).

Opening

UNFF21 Chair Ismail Belen (Türkiye) opened the Forum, underscoring the UNFF's importance as the only global forum gathering all nations and stakeholders for policy dialogue and shared action on all types of forests. He invoked Member States' shared responsibility to support the UNFF Secretariat.

UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Lok Bahadur Thapa (Nepal) said forests are essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and contributing to most Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

UN General Assembly (UNGA) President Annalena Baerbock (Germany) underlined the need to incorporate sustainable forest management (SFM) when designing international trade agreements, using the recent EU-MERCOSUR agreement as an example.

UN Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination Bjørg Sandkjær stressed forests as indispensable assets for sustainable development. She noted the UNGA-approved UN Decade for Afforestation and Reforestation (2027-2036) is an opportunity to scale up action and reverse forest loss worldwide.

Election of Officers and Adoption of the Agenda: Chair Belen noted elections for this session were held in 2024. The US, AUSTRALIA on behalf of Australia and Canada, ISRAEL, and ARGENTINA dissociated themselves from the election of Iran as Vice Chair, citing geopolitical concerns. IRAN recalled the decision two years ago was by consensus.

The provisional agenda (E/CN.18/2026/1) was adopted without amendment.

Presentation of the Global Forest Goals Report 2026

Sandkjær presented the [Global Forest Goals Report 2026](#). She said the report found progress on SFM, but deforestation and forest degradation continues. Sandkjær cited the report's call for accelerated action on:

- halting deforestation and reversing forest loss;
- closing the financing gap for SFM;
- strengthening forest governance and law enforcement;
- expanding restoration and resilience-building efforts; and
- enhancing cross-sectoral coordination and partnerships.

UNFF Secretariat Director Juliette Biao reported conclusions, including:

- investments in forest restoration, reforestation, and SFM are significant and global forest carbon stock has increased, but forest area has declined by 40 million hectares over ten years, with increasing drought, wildfires, and pests;
- global finance for SFM in 2023 was USD 84 billion but USD 300 billion is needed annually; and
- countries' progress in strengthening laws, institutions, and monitoring systems is undermined by fragmentation, weak enforcement, and illegal logging.

She called for speed, scale, and sustained commitment, through leadership, partnerships, policies, and political will.

Policy Discussions on the Implementation of the UNSPF 2017-2030: Activities in Support of the Thematic Priorities for the Biennium 2025-2026

The UNFF Secretariat introduced the document (E/CN.18/2026/2).

Secretariat's Overview of Achievements and Challenges:

Director Biao highlighted achievements since UNFF20, *inter alia*:

- the adoption by the UNGA of a resolution launching the UN Decade on Afforestation and Reforestation (2027-2036);
- country-led initiatives (CLIs) that have led from dialogue to solutions;
- the GFGs Report;
- strengthened knowledge exchange, particularly through the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF);
- reinforced policy coherence across the system; and
- improved communications and outreach, through a revamped website and enhanced digital engagement.

General Discussion: INDONESIA highlighted the establishment of the World Mangrove Center. Inviting the Forum to host its first ministerial meeting under the UN Decade on Afforestation and Reforestation in Tashkent in 2027, UZBEKISTAN called for increased global and regional cooperation to combat desertification.

GHANA highlighted central placement of trees when designing farming systems. The CONGO stressed accessible financing for African countries vulnerable to climate change.

TÜRKIYE proposed establishing a voluntary regional forest fire preparedness and technology transfer mechanism under the International Arrangement on Forests (IAF).

Noting that parties have committed to GFG 1 under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), GERMANY said political momentum can reverse deforestation.

MONGOLIA underlined flagship initiatives on land and people, food systems and soil health, finance, and water. BOLIVIA reported overhaul of environmental and forest policy through a legal framework integrating forests fully into sustainable development.

CYPRUS, on behalf of the EU, called for the omnibus resolution to welcome progress in implementing the Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the IAF and encourage continued implementation.

ISRAEL reported on water harvesting, use of native species, soil stabilization, and new tools on forest fires and restoration.

COLOMBIA reported on reducing the deforestation rate by 36% between 2022-2023, advancing sustainable value chains, facilitating legal timber markets, and implementing results-based payments.

UKRAINE reported war's impacts on natural ecosystems but stressed continuing tree-planting and wildlife rescue even under rocket fire.

ALGERIA underscored its Green Dam project rehabilitating 4.7 million hectares of forest.

THAILAND highlighted efforts to increase green area by 55% by 2037. She called for more streamlined access to the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network (GFFFN).

CUBA noted his country's success in maintaining 31% forest cover, but lamented embargo impacts on fuel access and equipment for SFM and forest fire prevention.

BRAZIL highlighted the United for Our Forests platform for dialogue and political coordination.

The UK noted agriculture expansion is one of the largest drivers of deforestation, committing to support legal and sustainable supply chains.

SAUDI ARABIA reported success in rehabilitating one million hectares of degraded land.

SWITZERLAND welcomed Forum efforts strengthening synergies with other environmental agreements. He noted support for CLIs.

MALAYSIA spoke of his country's continued commitment to maintain 50% of land area as forest cover.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE reported persistent struggles with deforestation and land degradation, but highlighted afforestation and agroforestry efforts.

PERU and SUDAN called for technical cooperation, adequate financing, and capacity building. NORWAY emphasized clear policy networks for achieving the GFGs.

KENYA noted their participation in North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation, requesting their strengthening. JAPAN stressed the sustainable use of forests contributes to decarbonization and a circular economy.

SOUTH AFRICA called for strengthening the UNFF Secretariat's capacity in preparation for final review of the IAF in 2030. NIGERIA noted continuing land degradation and deforestation and outlined efforts in ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation and mainstreaming nature-based solutions.

CANADA said all SDGs are forest-related, highlighting their commitment to SFM, including through the Global Forest Leadership Program.

The PHILIPPINES stressed that sustained action requires putting forests at the center of the 2030 Agenda. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION highlighted reforestation as an important tool to fight soil erosion.

INDIA reported on its Green Wall initiative to restore 6.31 million hectares.

AUSTRALIA highlighted its updating of 44 forest indicators and collaboration in regional and bilateral partnerships.

JAMAICA said Hurricane Melissa calls for integrating climate resilience into forest management and underscored the GFFN for capacity building.

IRAN said recent acts of aggression greatly damaged its national natural resources and watershed management.

CHINA highlighted controlling desertification and greening its Belt and Road Initiative.

BRAZIL noted 55% decrease in deforestation from 2022-2025, targeting forest expansion to 12 million hectares by 2030.

ARGENTINA stressed states' sovereign rights and development priorities, lamenting proliferation of unilateral trade restrictions.

ETHIOPIA highlighted forest conservation and restoration, including 48 billion trees planted under its Green Legacy Initiative.

GUATEMALA spoke of their USD 7 million invested in conservation and resilient agroforestry.

INTERPOL underscored protecting forests from illegal exploitation, explaining that over half of tropical timber losses can be attributed to illegal markets.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH called on governments to move from statements to implementation, noting their own readiness to do so.

Contributions of Members of the Forum to Implementing the UNSPF: MOROCCO reported on its June 2025 event on SFM on community-based forest management, technology and innovation, and sustainable forest financing.

TÜRKIYE reported on its CLI on forest fire preparedness and innovative technologies in Istanbul in October 2025. He invited participants to join discussions on integrated fire management at UNFCCC COP 31.

AUSTRIA reported on the Global Summit on Advancing Sustainable Forest-based Bioeconomy Approaches in Vienna in February 2026, noting priority actions including: ensuring inclusive, people-centered, and rights-based bioeconomy; and creating enabling conditions for value chains and innovation.

In subsequent discussion, AUSTRALIA supported acknowledging the Summit's outcomes in the omnibus resolution. MEXICO supported a proposal to limit CLIs to one per intersessional period to optimize resources and facilitate follow-up.

The CONGO called for finalizing a global strategy on afforestation and reforestation.

INDONESIA highlighted continuing prioritization of community-based SFM, inclusive forest governance, and strengthened export licensing system.

BRAZIL noted the Call to Action on Integrated Fire Management and Wildfire Resilience omnibus resolution launched at UNFCCC COP 30.

The UK supported the FAO Global Fire Management Hub as the UN's central coordinating platform.

SOUTH AFRICA urged collaboration and integrated forest management for achieving the GFGs.

CANADA supported references to CLI outcomes in the UNFF21 resolution.

Contributions of Members of the Forum to Implementing UNSPF: The EU supported continuing to give forests a high profile at UNFCCC COPs.

MALAYSIA encouraged CPF members to continue mobilizing resources and technical assistance.

MEXICO noted its technical cooperation with the US and Canada calling for increasing technical coordination on forests and contributions to the UNFF's Trust Fund.

The UK called for forests to be featured prominently in all three Rio Conventions.

The CONGO said achieving the GFGs requires international cooperation based in solidarity, policy coherence, and technology transfer. JAMAICA emphasized improving access to finance, capacity building, and technology transfer.

TOGO called for better integration of GFGs into regional strategies and action plans.

CHINA drew attention to their Bamboo as a Substitute for Plastic initiative. IUCN pointed to its Programme 2026-2029, highlighting: primary and old-growth forest protection; scaling up forest landscape restoration; and integrating biodiversity and climate action.

FOREST EUROPE highlighted the [State of Europe's Forests 2025](#) report. The ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES stressed West African forest losses of 80% over the past century.

The NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGO) MAJOR GROUP called for incorporating certification as a tool to address GFGs. The SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGY COMMUNITY MAJOR GROUP lamented insufficient political coordination, calling for enhanced policy and legal approaches and inclusiveness in decision-making.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION highlighted doubling of national financing on forest firefighting. SWITZERLAND recommended encouraging countries to host CLIs, subject to available financial resources. UNFF Secretariat Director Biao clarified that according to existing guidelines, countries organizing a CLI finance Secretariat participation. NEW ZEALAND expressed caution on limiting the number of CLIs per year.

GHANA announced their updated voluntary national contribution, aiming to reduce emissions from deforestation and land degradation. The WOMENS' MAJOR GROUP emphasized recognizing rural women as essential actors in ecosystem protection, calling for mandatory quotas for participation of women in governance of community-based forest management.

Contributions of and Enhanced Cooperation with Partners to Achieving the Thematic Priorities: The Secretariat introduced the document ([E/CN.18/2026/3](#)), explaining it includes the assessment of CPF joint initiatives and consideration of options to further strengthen collaboration within the Partnership.

CPF Chair Wu said recovery of forests is compromised under current climate change trajectories, stressing global commitments to accelerate action and CPF activities on scaling finance, forest monitoring, and inclusive forest management; capacity building; and enhancing global forest-related indicators.

Members thanked the CPF and MALAYSIA encouraged CPF members to continue mobilizing resources and technical assistance.

The FARMERS MAJOR GROUP reported on Major Group participation in the CPF forest pavilion at UNFCCC COP30 and a September 2025 CPF-supported global webinar on the CBD's Forest Programme.

In the Corridors

With Forum Members underscoring the need to accelerate action in the face of mounting environmental challenges, the packed plenary in the morning appeared to be a promising start. As many quickly noted, however, the process is not shielded from geopolitical complexities. On the first morning of plenary, several countries dissociated themselves from the 2024 decision appointing a delegate from Iran to the Bureau, Russia and Ukraine parried verbally, and Cuba made pointed statements about the impacts of the US embargo.

Meanwhile, however, many participants noted the fast-approaching 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs and for realizing the UNSPF. "We're starting to hear the clock tick," noted one observer wryly. While acknowledging much more progress needs to happen on a compressed timeline, many wondered if this can be realistically expected at a moment when development assistance budgets are tight and the UN is struggling to keep the lights on.