



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations



21 March
International Day of Forests

International Day of Forests 2016

**Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Participants,**

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you on behalf of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations to the celebration of the International Day of Forests 2016 focusing on the topic “Forests and Water”.

This event was made possible through the joint efforts of the Joint UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section, the UNECE Housing and Land Management Unit, the Secretariat of the Water Convention and its Protocol on Water and Health, the secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and several member States. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to those who contributed and congratulate them for the successful organization.

This is the fourth time that the world celebrates forests on the 21st of March. Let me recall briefly that early last year the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), a voluntary partnership of 14 major international UN and non-UN organizations, suggested to the UNFF Secretariat and FAO, the facilitators of the Day, to focus IDF 2016 on forest and water, and a global invitation was released accordingly. Considering the numerous challenges to both forests and water and that tomorrow is the World Water Day, no topic could be more opportune to celebrate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Let me justify this by mentioning some key facts.

Food security depends on water security – and water security depends on forests. In fact, forested watersheds and wetlands supply 75 percent of the world’s accessible fresh water for domestic, agricultural, industrial and ecological needs.

About one-third of the world’s largest cities obtain a significant proportion of their drinking water directly from forested protected areas. The populations of major cities such as Mumbai, Bogotá or New York rely on forests for their water supplies. This number continues to increase as urban centers grow in size and population.

And the most striking facts: nearly 80 percent of the world’s population is exposed to high levels of threat to water security. By 2050, over 2.3 billion people are projected to be living in river basins under severe water stress, especially in North and South Africa, and South and Central Asia.

Climate change has an important and often severe impact on forests and water cycles: it alters forests’ role in regulating water flows and influences the availability of water resources. The impacts of climate change may also be manifested in an increase in catastrophes such as floods, landslides or droughts – all of which could be mitigated by forest cover. Large-scale deforestation and forest degradation however can have aggravating impacts and can influence also precipitation patterns.

Forests act as natural water filters. Forests minimize soil erosion on site, control water run-off, reduce sediment in water bodies and trap or filter water pollutants in the forest litter. Forests are also at the forefront of reducing the effects of climate change. One important benefit for water is forests' cooling effect on the environment produced through evapotranspiration and the provision of shade.

Forests have a crucial role in building and strengthening resilience. When sustainably managed, forests contribute significantly to reducing soil erosion and the risk of landslides and avalanches, natural disasters which can disrupt the source and supply of freshwater. Forests protect and rehabilitate areas prone to soil degradation and erosion in upland areas.

Forests also reduce the effects of small-scale, frequent or local flooding, and prevent and reduce dryland salinity and desertification. Partial or complete removal of tree cover accelerates water discharge, increasing the risk of floods during the rainy season and drought in the dry season. However, the services provided by ecosystems around the world, particularly wetlands, are in decline. Between 1997 and 2011 a US\$4.3 to US\$20.2 trillion of ecosystem services were lost annually due to land use change. Improved water resource management can bring considerable economic gains. By 2030, the world is projected to face a 40 percent global water deficit under the business-as-usual climate scenario. However, every US\$1 invested in watershed protection can save anywhere from US\$7.5 to almost US\$200 in costs of a new water treatment and filtration facility. In developing countries, a US\$15 to US\$30 billion investment in improved water resources management could have direct annual income returns in the range of US\$60 billion.

Forests are a key component of watershed management – an integrated approach of using natural resources in a given geographical area drained by a water course. It aims to maintain and enhance all ecological function and guarantee the sustainable provision of major ecosystem services. Being aware of the importance of forests' roles in water and watersheds, FAO has been engaged in watershed management, forests and water and sustainable mountain development since the 1970s. The Organization provides technical assistance for its member countries in the design and implementation of field projects, supports international processes and prepares technical guidelines and information products in the field of forest and water, watershed management, sustainable mountain development, disaster risk reduction, and related advocacy and knowledge management.

The new Forest and Water Programme at FAO, based on the Forests and Water Action Plan launched at the XIV World Forestry Congress in September 2015, aims to showcase that forestry is not in competition with agriculture and urban development for water, but a synergistic land use that can address water and food security issues. Therefore, the Forest and Water Programme advocates for integrated policies and practice, and will collaborate strongly with the agriculture and water sectors to contribute to the achievement in particular of SDGs 6 and 15. Let me recall that this Programme featured prominently during the IDF celebration at FAO headquarters in Rome, earlier today.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that FAO stands ready to support, with its international partners, global, regional and national initiatives for achieving sustainable management of all types of forests and other natural resources, and work towards a sustainable future where there is food for all, poverty is eliminated and natural resources are preserved for future generations.

In this spirit I wish all of us a very successful International Day of Forests and invite you to watch a 60" video spot which major global TV networks have been airing for about a month now.

Thank you for your attention.