Statement

by

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Secretary
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at

the International Day of Forests event 2016

Geneva,

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Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are multiple links between forest and water. This vital interdependence is now also recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in the SDGs. For instance, target 15.1 stresses the need to conserve and restore both freshwater and forest ecosystems. At the same time, target 6.6 requires countries to protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes by 2020.

The first part of today’s event has reviewed multiple services provided by forests and I would now like to focus on yet another: the provision of drinking water. One third of the world’s 105 largest cities obtain a significant portion of their drinking water from protected forested areas, including Sydney, Tokyo, New York, Washington, Quito, San Francisco, Kiev and Moscow. Municipalities and water suppliers recognize the importance of healthy and intact forests for their citizens and often invest in forests upstream, for example using the approach of payment for ecosystem services.

Why do they do this? Because, using forests to clean water is in most cases much cheaper than treating water in plants, even if the water needs to be transported further. A study found that for every 10% increase in forest cover in the source watershed, treatment costs decreased by approximately 20%. Affordability of drinking water is a key aspect to ensure the realization of the human right to water, as also discussed during another UNECE event today and tomorrow on equitable access to water and sanitation.

How do we scale up such examples and ensure that more forests are properly managed and protected or water basins are reforested to provide clean water? We need resources, awareness, adequate legal and policy
frameworks and good governance, in particular increased cooperation between forest and water experts.

Concerning resources, payments for ecosystem services are a useful tool whereby, for example, water users pay upstream forest managers to use forests more sustainably. This approach is already effectively used worldwide. We developed recommendations on payment for ecosystems services under the UNECE Water Convention in 2006, which can give you inspiration and ideas.

Sustainable Forest Management has proved to be the appropriate framework. According to the recent FAO Forest Resources Assessment almost 660 million ha of forests (38.9% of the total) in the UNECE region is designated for water soil and water protection - visible part of them (54 million ha) is managed and protected exclusively for the water purification.

In the UNECE region, waters are characterized by their essentially transboundary nature, with more than 50% of the territory belonging to transboundary basins. This adds to the complexity of managing waters in a rational and sustainable way. The UNECE Water Convention recognizes the need for cooperation on water not only across borders but also across different sectors. This is crucial as the policies and management practices of different sectors have a direct impact on the quality and quantity of water resources.

The main objective of the Convention - the protection and sustainable management of transboundary water resources - cannot be achieved without protection of water-related ecosystems including forests and wetlands. The Convention therefore clearly spells out that protection and restoration of ecosystems is a core obligation for its Parties.

Forests are considered in the work under the Water Convention, for example, when we assess the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus in transboundary basins or when we help countries to jointly adapt to climate change. For instance, in the Dniester River basin, shared by Ukraine and the
Republic of Moldova, in a project which we implement with OSCE in the framework of the Environment and Security Initiative, seven thousands trees were planted to reduce vulnerability to climate change and floods.

Another important tool in the region in the UNECE-WHO/Europe Protocol on Water and Health which aims to ensure safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to all. The Protocol is a key tool to operationalize the human rights to water and sanitation and to achieve SDG6 on water and sanitation. To this end, the Protocol requires its Parties to set targets across the whole water cycle, with a strong focus on prevention. Indeed, the Protocol recognizes that by protecting water ecosystems, we protect the health and well-being of our citizens. Water resources management connects social and economic development to the protection of natural ecosystems.

We therefore need to put more focus on the link between forest and water, as well as, more broadly, between sectors- the main philosophy of the 2030 Agenda. The forest and water communities – those dealing with Integrated Water Resources Management plans and those dealing with National Forest Programmes - have enormous influence on each other, and can either help or hinder achieve their goals.

At UNECE, we have already made efforts in this direction: organizing back-to-back or joint meetings of forest and water managers. The event today, which reunites water, health and forest experts, is also a testimony to this approach. Today we celebrate our precious healthy forests and clean waters. The celebrations should remind us how much we need both and that one cannot exist without the other. Let us work together for these precious resources, so that they can sustain the needs of the present and future generations.

Thank you