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**Opening statement**

**By**

**Ms. Olga Algayerova**

**Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the**

**78<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry**

**4 November**

**Tempus 2 and online, 11:00 AM**

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues,

Welcome to the 78<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry (COFFI). Usually this room is filled to the last seat, so it feels strange to see it like this, but I take comfort in knowing that you are all joining us from the safety of your homes. I am confident that the change in format does not affect your determination to continue supporting our efforts to protect and regenerate our forests across the UNECE region.

Of course, COVID-19 has made our aim to achieve sustainable development within this decade more challenging. But this must not discourage us. More than ever before, we need to strengthen our efforts, across sectors and regions, to improve livelihoods, mitigate climate change, and protect our natural world from exploitation and further degradation.

In those contexts, forests are absolutely key. They are our climate guardians, absorbing one-third of the carbon dioxide released from the burning of fossil fuels every year, moderating extreme temperatures, and hosting the incredible biodiversity we are lucky to have. But these guardians are tired. They are threatened by changing climate, storms, beetle infestations, and wildfires. We must do our part to reduce damages and support their recovery. This includes ensuring financing for forests as part of the green recovery stimulus, supporting restoration efforts, and continuing to manage them in a sustainable manner.

This will be central as we enter the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Indeed, this year's COFFI session is focused on forests in a Decade of Action, giving distinguished delegates an opportunity to discuss how we can build back better with forests.

Some notable efforts are already under way, and I want to take this opportunity to highlight the work done on forest landscape restoration in our region. So far, countries in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia pledged to restore close to 3 million hectares of degraded land under the Bonn Challenge, a global effort to restore 350 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. This also counts under the ECCA30, a regional initiative to restore 30 million hectares by 2030 in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

This is a very promising development in our region. In fact, a better understanding of how restoration contributes to rural development, healthier ecosystems and climate change mitigation has spurred public and private bodies into action. I invite you this week to discuss the challenges laying ahead in this decisive decade and to prepare, as an international community, for forward-looking and ambitious action.

To conclude, I thank the many partners who have helped make this week possible, including the colleagues at conference management services for working tirelessly to accommodate our meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you will find inspiration during this meeting on how we can put forests at the heart of the Decade of Action.

Thank you.