

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Forests are rare in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but they include highly diverse ecosystems, support an extremely rich biodiversity, and protect land against erosion and soil loss. As with any rare good, these precious forests should be valued, protected and cared for.

With higher incidences of extreme weather events and climatic change, it is more important than ever to fully understand our forests' vulnerability and potential, and to reflect their true value in providing social, economic and environmental benefits.

Important forest-related milestones have been reached recently. Last year, countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia committed to restoring over 2.5 million ha of forest landscape under the Bonn Challenge by 2030. The Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the Bonn Challenge in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which was organized by the UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section in Astana in June 2018, also resulted in the *Astana Resolution*. It commits the region to go beyond 2.5 million ha, and strengthen partnerships and regional cooperation to this end.

Via a UNDA project on Accountability Systems for Sustainable Forest Management in the Caucasus and Central Asia, UNECE and FAO have worked closely with governments and key stakeholders to strengthen the reporting capacity and accountability systems.

Today we are pleased to present to you a series of publications focusing on the Caucasus and Central Asia. They are the fruit of concerted efforts by the UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section to develop sustainable forest management and achieve coherent forest policies in the region.

The study on the "State of forests of the Caucasus and Central Asia" is the first ever publication that enables us to fully understand forests resources and the forest sector in the region, including major challenges and possible policy responses.

Practical tools are set out in the “Guidelines for the Development of a Criteria and Indicator Set for Sustainable Forest Management”. These incorporate the key outcomes of the UNDA workshops, and define clear priorities and targets to improve monitoring, reporting and assessment of key aspects of sustainable forest management performance.

2021 to 2030 will be the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. In this context, the study on “Forest Landscape Restoration in the Caucasus and Central Asia” provides much needed data on the key drivers of forest degradation, and assesses the potential for forest landscape restoration in the region.

Before concluding, please join me in thanking the Governments of Switzerland and Germany for their generous financial contribution to the publications, and to Switzerland for supporting this event and offering our breakfast.

We invite you to familiarise yourself with our new knowledge resources, and encourage us all to reflect about the importance of forests for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, not just in the Caucasus and Central Asia but anywhere in the world.

Thank you.

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