

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

# What **UNECE** does for you



## ...UNECE works for your forests

As the main consumer, producer and exporter of forest products in the world, the UNECE region has a major role to play in the protection of your forests. The UNECE's work covers 5 major areas: markets and statistics; forest resources assessment and indicators of sustainable forest management in the region; sector outlook studies – analysis and follow-up; social and cultural aspects of forestry; and policy and cross-sectoral issues.

Kit Prins, Chief of the UNECE Timber Section, comments on the significance of sustainable forest management in the region.



### **What does your work consist of?**

The objective is to promote sustainable forest management in the region, specifically through monitoring and analysing trends and issues.

We work very closely with the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), which is the lead agency for forestry issues worldwide, and the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe. We also work with the UN Forum for Forests.

### **Do you propose rules or regulations to governments?**

We don't make any regulations. Usually, the responsibility for forest management is at the national or sub-national level, like for example provinces or German Länder. They actually

set the rules. Our objective is to help those who are responsible for setting the rules. We do it by providing them with good information and giving them the possibility of exchanging their experience. Our key activities are statistics, analysis of markets and of the forest resource and now forest policies and institutions.

Governments have their own laws. And the conditions and the ownership patterns vary enormously. All countries of Europe have legislations that say forest areas should be protected, which means that you can't deforest. It's not for us to tell them that. And specific rules for forest cultivation or species to plant are not our business either. Furthermore, half West European forests are privately owned.

**The UNECE region is the main consumer, producer**

### **and exporter of forest products in the world, but is there any disparity between the member countries?**

You have a huge range. On the one side you have the largest country of the world, which is Russia. It has an absolutely enormous forest resource, which is heavily underused. And it exports large quantities of roundwood. Then, at the other extreme, you have countries like the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, which are heavily industrialized and quite prosperous. They have to import and they have a high level of consumption, but also a high level of recycling and very dynamic industries. There is the United States of course, which is a very large producer and a very large consumer. Then you have the specialized forest products exporting countries like Finland, Sweden and Austria. They have very sophisticated industries and a very efficient structure.

### **Forests are a cross-sectoral concern, so is priority given to one of the sectors in particular?**

There are hundreds of principles that have clearly cross-sectoral influences. If there are changes in the forest sector it is often because of developments outside the sector. They can be due to economic changes, educational changes and social changes. So it is very important to understand these "mega trends". But that doesn't mean to say that we, as a very small unit – there are 10 people in the Timber Section – with very limited resources, should move away from what we are good at. So we concentrate on understanding and disseminating understanding

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of the forest sector, while taking account of its social and economic environment. One example of what we are doing now is wood energy, which is expanding a lot now all over Europe, except that nobody has any figures. People don't know which type of wood has been burnt more than before, how it has been burnt. So we, with our colleagues of the International Energy Agency, are required to put figures on what everybody knows is happening. In this way we can have some sort of a base line and a more rational analysis in the future. Another example is the draft code of practice payment for water related ecosystem services, which has been drawn up under the UNECE Water Convention. And the main ecosystems concerned are wetlands and forests which regulate water flow. We participated actively in drafting that code of practice.

### **Could you explain the issue of illegal logging.**

In simple words it means cutting trees when you are not allowed to. But it happens all over the world. In most of Western and Northern Europe it's of minor importance. However, in some developing countries and in some transitional countries, in particular in Russia, it has become quite important. A lot of the deforestation in the tropics is due to illegal logging and it can take place for two broad reasons. One is poverty, which incites poor people to cut trees for their survival, to cook their food usually, and that happens also in the UNECE region, in Central Asia or Caucasus for instance. The other main type of illegal logging is driven by profit. This is a very large-scale crime, in areas where the rule of law is very weak and maybe forest guards and policemen are paid very small salaries. So there is big money to be made from cheating in many ways, either by force or else bribery. And there are still plenty of people that are prepared to buy – we are talking train loads and ship loads. The World Bank has estimated the damage caused by illegal logging at 15 billion dollars a year. Because of course the price of legal timber goes down under the pressure of illegal timber.

### **Has some progress been made in that area?**

It is very slow. There has been one definite progress. There is an awareness of the problem. Illegal logging is not new, but what is new is that the countries involved recognize that it exists. Until quite recently, most governments denied it happened, but now they realize this is very damaging to them. It is a threat to economic progression and to good institutions. And there is also the process of certification in the importing countries. Increasingly, in Western Europe public purchases and private citizens don't want to be the accomplices of illegal logging. Systems have been set up to give them some assurance they are not accomplices in crime.

### **You have mentioned the concept of forest product. Does that term include products other than wood?**

Wood is the most important forest product, which includes all its by-products like panels or paper for example. But increasingly there are non-wood forest products, some of which are extremely valuable. For instance, truffles. We are talking about 60 or 70 Swiss francs for 100 grams. They come from forests and without old trees you have no truffles. There is also hunting. You can pay hundreds of euros just for the right to shoot a deer. It also includes recreation, which usually does not have to be paid for. And finally, environmental services, landscape beauty, protection against erosion are forest services, which mostly don't get paid for. Europe is lucky because it has very stable forest resource, so in Western Europe at least there is no immediate threat. But, as we saw it in Germany in the 1980s, the minute the forest resource is under threat, public opinion responds very strongly, very rapidly.

### **And what about the use of paper?**

Consumption of paper has increased over the last 30-40 years. The rate of growth of paper consumption has been the same as

the rate of growth of the economy. There are, for example, warning signs in the US for newsprint. But one thing you should be aware of is that although paper is made out of wood, an increasing proportion comes from waste paper, recycled paper, 40-50% in Europe. So in the forest sector, another source is used wood. In Switzerland or in Germany, if you demolish a house, you will recover the wood, either for burning or for use as raw material, and that is becoming increasingly important. So the forest sector, with its recycling, and with its links with the environment, industry and global trade is an example for other sectors where you have new issues for the 21st century.

### **Is it your role to deal with the issue of forest fires?**

It is a very complex issue. Again, we provide information and forest statistics. It's much more complicated than what you hear on the news. It is not only a question of bad or careless people setting fire to forests. The condition of the forests is very important. If they are not intensively managed and used, if the fuel builds up, if the forest is not cleared or if there is a rural depopulation there is nobody to see the fire when it starts. So it gets big before anybody can do anything about it. And of course climate change is an important reason for forest fires.

### **Do you really see the impact of climate change on forest fires?**

The scientists are still discussing that, but probably yes. There are places like Southern Spain or Portugal where it definitely has an impact. The incidence of forest fires is about the same every year. It is the seriousness of each fire that changes. It depends on how the forest is managed and how hot and dry it is.

### **Any solutions to this problem?**

Oh yes, of course, plenty. But they require political will. It involves paying enough money for people to watch the fires. It also involves having suppression forces that would be available very quickly because it is easy to put out a fire after half an hour, but after an hour and a half it is extremely

difficult, especially if it is a hot day. Also, in many areas around the Mediterranean, it is compulsory to treat the forests every year or every five years, to cut the brush for example. So if there is a match it doesn't burn so badly. And of course, having more people helps because there are many parts of Europe where there are very few people in rural areas, and that is a big danger. And when the forest hasn't got any economic value, which is often the case, why should people stay? This is the fundamental problem of the Mediterranean forests.

### **How do you promote international cooperation for preventing or resolving this problem?**

We have a team of specialists, which basically brings together the world wild land fire community and a very interesting website with satellite pictures in real time. But there are a lot of really difficult technical issues involved in getting the suppression forces to work together. They have to practice together, speak the same language, have the same computer communications. But there are sub-regional forest fires agreements, one for the western Mediterranean, one for the eastern Mediterranean, one for the Baltic regions. And we are helping to provide a framework to make that possible.

### **What kind of political obstacles do you encounter? Is it about money?**

Yes, unfortunately for forest policy, trees don't vote. There is not enough money devoted to basic tasks in forestry. Up until 20 years ago, in most parts of Europe there was enough profit from the sale of wood to pay for these other things. Now the wood prices have gone down because of competition and it has become very difficult for the forest owners, public and private. There is not enough money for them to do what needs to be done.

### **What are your recent achievements?**

We've just issued the Forest Products Annual Market Review, providing up-to-date information about developments of the last few years. We contributed to the Global Forest Resource Assessment 2005, which is the basic document worldwide on this condition of the forests. And we have also produced a study on trends in all parts of the sector, the European Forest Sector Outlook Study, where we make projections on the future and identify the emerging long-term issues.

### **And your challenges for the future?**

For our section, the challenges are to produce better, more available information and analysis, to provide better policy discussion and in particular to help those countries, which are left behind at the moment. We want to bring them into the European forest community.

For more information:  
[www.unece.org/hlm/welcome.html](http://www.unece.org/hlm/welcome.html)

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