



PRESS RELEASE

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Celebrating Forests – Source of the Water of Life

The many benefits that forests provide, including their role in providing clean water, are being celebrated across Europe today and tomorrow - World Forest Day and World Water Day. (March 21 and 22)

People across the world depend on forests for a wide range of goods and services. Some of these benefits and services, such as biodiversity and timber supplies, are well understood, but others, such as forests' importance to the provision of clean water to towns and cities, are less widely known, according to FOREST EUROPE.

FOREST EUROPE, the inter-governmental process for sustainable forest management across Europe, is therefore using these two days to highlight the need for sustainable management and protection of forests to preserve their benefits, including for water resources.

“Sustainably managed forests provide more environmental, economic and social benefits than any other land use,” said Arne Ivar Sletnes, Head of the FOREST EUROPE Liaison Unit Oslo. “Forests help to balance the climate, sequester carbon and replenish the air with vital oxygen. They produce raw materials for renewable, environmentally friendly products - wood products continue to store carbon throughout their lifetime, and can substitute for non-renewable materials and fuels.”

“Forests are important for biological diversity. They mitigate natural disasters such as floods, droughts and avalanches, provide jobs and generate income, support rural and community development, and benefit human health through a broad range of recreation opportunities.”

“Crucially, sustainable forest management can also help to protect supplies of good-quality fresh water and cushion the effects of climate change. Water is essential to life, but its availability and quality in many regions of the world are increasingly endangered by overuse, misuse and pollution. By 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living with absolute water scarcity, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that two-thirds of the world's population could experience water-stress conditions.”

Although Europe's forests cover 44 per cent of the land area, and continue to expand, many other regions need help to halt deforestation and forest degradation. Meanwhile, half of the planet's population lives in urban areas: cities and towns are growing at an unprecedented rate, with many regions, including Europe, experiencing increasing imbalances between water supply and demand.

“By capturing and storing water, healthy forests can be part of the solution to this problem,” Mr Sletnes added. “They preserve water resources and make it available to the world's people and the



wider environment. Forests stabilise soil and minimise erosion; they trap sediments and pollutants and help to protect lakes and watercourses. Forests influence the timing and quantity of water availability by intercepting rainfall, evaporating moisture from their foliage, holding moisture in and transpiring it from their soils, and capturing fog water.”

European policies and practices for sustainable forest management are essential for the supply of good-quality fresh water, for protection from hazards such as floods and soil erosion, and for combating desertification. Ten per cent of European forests are designated primarily for soil and water protection, and sustainable forest management tools developed in Europe can be put to good use.

Through the 2007 Resolution on Forests and Water, FOREST EUROPE's participating countries and the European Union recognised the link between forest protection and water. Ministers committed themselves to maintaining and enhancing forests' water and soil protection functions, which in turn help to alleviate water-related natural disasters. They agreed on the need to develop, improve and co-ordinate policies for forest and water resource management, especially to ensure forests' resilience to climate change and an expected increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events.

Climate models developed for the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predict a significant decrease in rainfall in the Mediterranean basin, while Central and Northern Europe can expect more winter rainfall. These developments can result in more landslides, floods and droughts, but these events can be alleviated by sustainable forest management. Research results demonstrate that proper maintenance and the restoration of damaged and degraded forest ecosystems can play a protective role and cushion the effects of climate change. Water protection is therefore a high priority for FOREST EUROPE work.

At the forthcoming FOREST EUROPE Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe on 14-16 June in Oslo, Norway, ministers responsible for forests in the 46 participating countries and the European Union will take political decisions of importance for protecting forests and securing their vital goods and services, including fresh water supplies.

Mr Sletnes concluded: “Taking action to preserve forests and safeguard their environmental, economic and social benefits is particularly relevant on World Forest Day and World Water Day in 2011, the International Year of Forests.”

- For more information about FOREST EUROPE visit www.foresteuropa.org.
- For information about World Water Day, visit www.worldwaterday.org.
- For further information about the International Year of Forests, visit www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011.

About FOREST EUROPE – The Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe

FOREST EUROPE is the pan-European policy process for the sustainable management of the continent's forests. It develops common strategies for its 46 participating countries and the European Union on how to protect and sustainably manage forests. Founded in 1990, the



continuous co-operation of FOREST EUROPE has led to achievements such as the guidelines, indicators and criteria for sustainable forest management.

Priority topics of FOREST EUROPE are to strengthen the role of forests in mitigating climate change, to secure the supply of good-quality fresh water, enhance and preserve forest biodiversity and provide renewable forest products. Other important tasks are to develop a framework for future political collaboration and to prepare options for decision by ministers on a possible legally binding agreement on forests in Europe. Norway currently holds the chairmanship of FOREST EUROPE and will convene the next Ministerial Conference on 14-16 June 2011.

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