

Minister of Agriculture and Food, Mr. Lars Peder Brekk

Opening statement MCPFE ELM, Oslo 24.11.09

Dear forestry colleagues,

It's a pleasure for me to welcome you to Oslo.

This is an important meeting for discussion on future role and road of the Pan-European process.

Forests and forest policy issues are now discussed in a number of different processes and fora. I experience a steadily increasing interest in forests - and forest policy issues - in Norway, and abroad.

An important explanation for this is the COP 15 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in Copenhagen in December. I think we share the expectations for forests and forestry to be included in a comprehensive way in the discussions in Copenhagen, and that we should consider COP 15 outcome in our future work on forests in Europe.

And, while climate change issues may be seen as the overall reason for the increasing interest in forests, we know that forests are of value to society also for a range of other reasons, just to mention: water security, wood products, biodiversity and bio-energy issues.

Colleagues,

MCPFE, as a joint European process has been working on these - and several other important forest issues - for almost 20 years. The results - so far - proved

to be most useful. They form a good basis for further work on forests in Europe and for improvements, in the context of responding to new challenges that our societies face.

Since the Expert Level Meeting in Oslo in May 2008, *substantial progress* was made in implementing decisions taken at the Ministerial Conference in Warsaw 2007.

At *this meeting* we are presented to the results of this work, namely:

- the *external review* of the pan-European process;
- the findings of the working groups on *sustainable criteria for biomass* production, and
- the *recommendations* on further steps from the working group on a possible *legally binding agreement on forests in Europe*.

It is *time to discuss and decide upon* arising opportunities to make a difference and to strengthen forestry cooperation arrangements in Europe for meeting present and future challenges.

Please, let me highlight few specific issues at this point.

As climate change has become *the number one* environmental challenge, we experience more focus on the forest sector. But we also have some ‘homework’ to do.

While recent statistics show that in Europe both *forest area and the volume of growing timber* is still increasing, expert reports warn that consequences of climate change *may* put vital functions of some of Europe’s forests under threat.

The rate and frequency of droughts, wild fires, storms, pests and deceases affecting forests in Europe has increased alarmingly within the last years.

Those challenges have to be addressed.

Secondly, growing concern among people on non-sustainable use of world's forest resources is a fact. Deforestation and degradation are real problems in many regions of the world. This is a sound concern, and should be dealt with in a proper way.

But the attention given to these problems tend to influence the general understanding among people on how the forests conditions are also in Europe.

In Europe, we still face a challenge in communicating to the society the facts about forests, for example, the contributions by European forests in mitigating climate change.

That said, I think that the platform and the concepts for sustainable forest management that we have already established through the MCPFE work should serve as a starting point when discussing future forest protection and sustainable use.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have learned about some of the results from the work carried out by the *working group on sustainability criteria for biomass production*.

Although there is always room for improvement, no severe gaps were identified in the tools of MCPFE regarding sustainable forest management. *The non-*

binding status of the tools was, however, identified as an issue for them being used by regulatory processes and institutions.

This brings me to one of the important questions for you to decide upon at this meeting: *how to proceed with the work on a possible legally binding agreement on forests in Europe?*

Two issues will be of special importance to consider in that regard:

First, it is my opinion that the multiple goods and services that the forests provide should be secured and further utilised. This is the overall goal!

Forests should continue to contribute to employment and rural incomes, development of modern industries, climate change mitigation, energy security and last but not least; provide for biodiversity conservation.

Therefore, I think that a *possible legally binding agreement* could serve as a *tool* for securing and developing the multiple functions of forests in Europe for a long term perspective. We should focus on the opportunities that forest provide for the society.

Secondly, I want to express my appreciation of the dynamic nature of the political cooperation on sustainable forest management in Europe and the flexibility to respond to new challenges.

The strength of the MCPFE as an open access policy and participatory process with regard to stakeholders is well recognised. The value of the MCPFE cooperation as an open, inclusive and flexible high level policy platform should be maintained also in the future.

Colleagues,

If the Expert Level Meeting on basis of the work group recommendations finds that a legally binding agreement may be a realistic and desirable option, the time is now for shifting *from exploration to preparation*.

In my view this will be necessary to enable us to make an informed political decision at the Ministerial Conference in 2011, which Norway has the honour to host.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my sincere opinion that your tasks for these two days in Oslo are to give direction and speed for the forest cooperation in Europe in the nearest future.

That is the definition of *leadership*, and while it is a heavy responsibility, it also gives the possibility to influence the development and set up of the agenda for sustainable forest management in Europe.

Your work will contribute substantially to the decisions to be made by at the Ministerial Conference – and I personally expect – that it will be the important milestone for choosing the way forward for Europe's forests and forestry.

I wish you all a pleasant stay in Oslo, and I hope that your work will be successful in order to enter a new stage to enable for important decisions for safeguarding sustainable management of forests in Europe.

Thank You.