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NORTH AMERICAN FOREST COMMISSION

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FORESTS FOR FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Follow-up to the conclusions of the International Conference

I. Introduction

1. Food security and nutrition are high on the political agenda at the global, regional and national levels. FAO estimates that 870 million people still suffer from chronic hunger, with no means to produce sufficient food for themselves or to earn enough income with which to purchase it. With the world population projected to rise to more than nine billion by 2050, FAO estimates that overall global agricultural output needs to expand by about 60 per cent over 2005/7 levels to meet global food requirements. This may translate into putting new land into cultivation, consequently increasing pressure on existing natural resources, including forests and rangelands.
2. Deforestation and unplanned land-use change triggered by increasing demand for food, fibre and fuel are causing biodiversity loss and desertification, reducing the productive capacity of ecosystems, affecting water availability and limiting the collection of fuelwood – all of which have negative implications for food security, especially that of the rural poor.
3. The many ways in which forests, trees on farms and agroforestry systems contribute to food security and nutrition are poorly understood, underestimated and inadequately reflected in national development strategies, especially in developing countries.
4. In May 2013, FAO organized the International Conference on Forests for Food Security and Nutrition with the objective to increase understanding of the important role that forests, trees on farms and agroforestry systems can play in improving the food security and nutrition of rural people, especially in developing countries and to explore ways to integrate this knowledge in policy decisions at the national and international levels.
5. The conference highlighted the many ways in which forests, trees on farms and agroforestry systems provide nutritious foods, energy, fodder, pollination, income generation and employment opportunities and important ecosystems services beneficial for agriculture. Participants identified key challenges hindering these contributions, innovative approaches and emerging opportunities to strengthen the role of forests and trees outside forests, in food security and nutrition.

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II. The benefits of forests, trees outside forests and agroforestry systems

6. Forest foods and tree products, such as leaves, seeds, nuts, honey, fruits, mushrooms, insects and game animals, have been important components of rural diets for millennia and may be key in times of economic, political or ecological crisis. The wide range of medicinal plants found in forests contributes to the health and well-being of forest-dependent people and forms the basis of many pharmaceutical products now produced globally. Forests and trees outside forests are important sources of fodder for livestock, especially in drylands, and also a refuge in extreme dry periods. The genetic diversity in natural forests offers huge potential for the discovery, development and improvement of new sources of food and medicines, among others.

7. The ecosystem services provided by forests and trees outside forests make important contributions to agricultural production and forest-dependent communities. As habitat to an estimated 80 percent of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, forests provide genetic material important for crop and livestock improvement and are home to many pollinator species. Forests and trees mitigate climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide and storing carbon. They can also help to reduce the vulnerability of people to climate change and increase their capacity to adapt to it.

8. Forested wetlands and mangrove forests help protect coastal zones from flooding, thereby increasing the stability of food production in these areas. Forests also play vital roles in riverine and coastal fisheries, which are often particularly important in poor communities. Mountain forests provide essential ecosystem services, such as the provision of high-quality water for downstream communities and their agricultural activities.

9. An estimated 2.6 billion people rely on wood fuel, including charcoal, for cooking. The use of wood as a source of energy is vital for local economies and for maximizing the palatability and nutritional value of foods that require cooking.

10. Forests are often particularly important for rural women, who use them to help ensure the food security of their families. Apart from fuelwood collection, women also harvest a wide range of forest products, such as medicines and wild foods, for household use and sale. In many countries, women are also involved in enterprises to add value to non-wood forest products (NWFPs) to supplement household incomes.

11. Indigenous peoples and other local communities hold an immense wealth of traditional knowledge on the cultivation, harvesting and preparation of forest foods and tree products and on sustainable land management. Traditional forest-agriculture landscapes tend to have high resilience in the face of environmental and social perturbations.

III. Challenges and opportunities

12. National development, agricultural and food security and nutrition strategies do not take into account the many contributions of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition. This is mainly because of lack of knowledge and data to support effective policy-making on the role of non-wood forest products, wildlife and forest ecosystem services in food security and nutrition. An internationally agreed framework could guide the collection, reporting and dissemination of data on the use and trade of NWFPs, wildlife and forest ecosystem services important for food security and nutrition.

13. Over harvesting of tree products and forest foods, including wild meat is a serious issue in some countries. Poorly implemented land-use actions associated with, for example, unsustainable logging, mining and agriculture, can have cumulative effects that cause the impoverishment of land and local communities. Policies that improve rights of use and access to land, forests and trees could create significant incentives for small-scale farmers to adopt agroforestry systems and ensure recognition of agroforestry as an investment option.

14. The environmental costs of unsustainable agricultural practices are often ignored. Combined with the distorting effects of subsidies, this can make agriculture more profitable than the sustainable management of forests and agroforestry systems. Investments that support smallholder agroforestry ventures in marketing their products and ecosystem services, including through fair-trade initiatives, are yielding encouraging results for both investors and producers.

15. Women often have specialized knowledge of forests and trees in terms of their species diversity, uses for various purposes, and management and conservation. However, the role of women in forestry value chains is often poorly supported by policy makers and service providers. Supporting the development of female-owned small forest based enterprises creates income generation opportunities that contribute to food security. Microfinance loans to small and medium-sized forest enterprises of women have been shown to lead to rises in family incomes in rural areas and to increases in health, nutrition and quality of life.

IV. Recommendations

16. Improving the security of tenure of land and forest resources for indigenous peoples, other local communities and marginalized people, could be achieved by applying the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

17. Strengthening rural community-based institutions will improve access to knowledge, finance, markets, better prices and technologies for local people. This involves supporting the development of entrepreneurial, financial and planning skills among small-scale forest producers to encourage their participation in, and maximize the remuneration they receive from, market-oriented activities in agroforestry, tree-growing, NWFPs, small-scale wood processing and the provision of ecosystem services.

18. In order to close the gender gap training institutional staff on gender issues, involving women in monitoring, reporting and verification activities, and developing a gender-sensitive intersectoral roadmap for strengthening the role of forests and trees outside forests for food security and nutrition are essential.

19. An integrated approach to food security and nutrition is needed whereby relevant sectoral policies, including those on agriculture, forests, trees, wildlife, and food security and nutrition, have well-defined objectives, targets and time frames for their implementation and are coordinated inter-sectorally, and where all stakeholders, from forest-dependent communities to all relevant ministries, are actively involved in their development, implementation and monitoring.

20. Better use should be made of traditional knowledge to ensure the sustainability of wild forest foods. This includes encouraging research that supports the sustainable use of wild forest species of plants, insects and other wild animals, to improve yields and increase the sustainability of food production.

21. Agricultural production can be expanded without the loss or degradation of forests, for example, through the restoration of degraded forest lands and the greater use of trees outside forests as a means of intensifying agricultural productivity. Safeguard mechanisms are needed to ensure that the full impacts of forest conversion and other activities, e.g. mining, on food security and nutrition are taken into account.

22. Land-use planning should take into account the many important roles of forests and trees outside forests in food security and nutrition. This requires inter-sectoral cooperation to promote the sustainable management of forests and trees outside forests at the landscape scale and including forests and trees outside forests in resilience strategies.

23. Income generation from forests should be strengthened by:

- increasing opportunities for green jobs and improving conditions for forest workers, especially the most vulnerable, and integrating decent employment concerns in forest and other natural resource policies and programmes;
- encouraging the development of markets for forest ecosystem services, such as the provision of clean drinking water, and other innovative financing mechanisms to support the role of forests and trees outside forests in food security and nutrition;
- training forest-dependent communities, particularly women and youth, in the management of sustainable forest enterprises to gain access to equitable value-chains, such as those applied in fair trade.

24. Collaborating nationally and internationally to improve data collection, reporting and monitoring of NWFPs, forest ecosystem services, forest wildlife and other forest-related aspects of food security and nutrition is crucial to improve data availability. This includes developing indicators, tools and methods, developing the necessary capacity and creating incentives for greater collaboration between scientific disciplines, government sectors and rural institutions to synthesize scientific data and traditional knowledge on the role of forests and trees outside forests in food security and nutrition.

25. Increasing awareness of the importance of NWFPs and forest ecosystem services, the socio-economic conditions of forest-dependent people, and the role of forests and trees outside forests in food security and nutrition will involve establishing transparent and inclusive platforms for the dissemination and exchange of knowledge and experiences. Efforts need to be stepped up to share knowledge on the role of forests and trees outside forests in food security and nutrition in accessible, compelling formats to key stakeholders, including civil society, rural institutions, scientists and policy-makers.

V. Points for consideration

26. The Commission may wish to invite countries to take into account the key recommendations of the Conference by:

- developing evidence-based and inclusive forest policies that take into account the role of forests for food security and nutrition and mainstreaming forestry into national development policies, especially those related to food security and nutrition;
- generating broader political commitment across sectors for the protection and sustainable management of forests including wildlife;
- undertaking more integrated land use planning to achieve socio-economic objectives, including food security and nutrition;
- strengthening access by forest-dependent communities to forest resources by implementing the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security;
- promoting the restoration of degraded forest lands and the greater use of trees outside forests and agroforestry systems as means of intensifying agricultural productivity.

27. The Commission may wish to recommend that FAO support countries in strengthening the contributions of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition in particular in:

- increasing awareness and understanding of the links between forests, food security and nutrition. This could include strengthening multi-sectoral stakeholder platforms for more inclusive and cross-sectoral policy dialogue;
- developing mechanisms to improve data collection, monitoring and reporting related to the role of forests for food security and nutrition;
- strengthening the capacity to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate evidence-based forest policies, investments and programmes that take into consideration the role of forests in achieving food security and nutrition;

- strengthening entrepreneurial, financial and planning skills of community-based forest managers and forest producer associations to enable them to gain access to markets and receive equitable benefits from forests, including through value-addition.