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**Statement**

**by**

**Mr. Sven ALKALAJ**

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**Opening of Metsa2013, the Joint session of the  
UNECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry and the FAO  
European Forestry Commission**

**Rovaniemi, Finland, 9 December 2013**

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to take part in this opening session. At every conference we are inclined to say how important that gathering is, how unique, how special. In the case of 'Metsa2013'; however, we really are in front of a unique and special gathering, which deserves to be called a 'milestone' event for the many reasons that I would like to share with you now.

First, I am sure you would all agree with me that this location in the Arctic Circle provides a special setting and that we are enjoying exceptional hospitality. I take this opportunity to thank you, Minister Koskinen, and to thank Finland, as our host country, for this exceptional opportunity. The Geneva-based UNECE-FAO Forestry and Timber Section, which worked intensively with Finland to the preparation of this meeting, witnessed exceptional professionalism and generosity from the local organizers. As one result, I understand that there will be a large number of unique events for participants to enjoy throughout this week. Also, in Rovaniemi, recently declared the official city of the 2013 European Forest Week, we have a special Ambassador, Santa Claus. This choice was strategic, as his popularity, I am sure, will help us reach out far beyond these walls and, in particular, to communicate a message about European forests to younger generations. Participation in this meeting is very high, making this event one of the largest, if not the largest, pan-European gathering on forests in history.

Indeed, for this meeting, and the European Forest Week, the investment in outreach and communication has been exceptional and is already showing its impact on public opinion. As a sector, we have repeated many times how essential is to communicate the right message about European forests, the need for their sustainable management and the increased use of forest products. Very often, however, we have been, 'preaching to the converted'. The campaign for this European Forest Week and its messages are finally spreading throughout the public at large, and are meant for an audience that goes well beyond our forestry world.

Second, this meeting provides an exceptional opportunity to look ahead. A panel of

eminent speakers will show us a vision for our future forests, allowing us to share ideas and plans on how the future should look like, how to achieve multi-functionality and how to transition towards a green economy. This discussion should make us reflect on what we, as policy makers, businesses and citizens, can do for forests and the forest sector as well as how we can identify the right directions and steer change to where we want to go.

Keeping in mind these opportunities and the yet to be realized potential of forests, this meeting will discuss future plans. The meeting is expected to adopt the “Action Plan for the Forest Sector in a Green Economy”. This is another reason for considering this gathering ‘exceptional’, because it will make available a practical tool that can assist countries and organizations in the forest sector to take action, invest their resources, identify priorities and take steps toward green production and consumption patterns. The Plan was approved at a Special Session back in June of this year for submission to “Metsa 2013” and I trust that in this joint meeting all delegates are ready to welcome this plan and make it their own.

In fact, I have been informed that numerous actions are already being implemented in a range of countries, and this is a clear demonstration of the plan’s value as an effective blueprint for sustainability in the forest sector.

Another reason why I believe this meeting is unique is the very high participation of forest stakeholders, in particular, from the private sector. Indeed, it was our intention to call upon the private sector to help us strengthen the dialogue with those working with and in forests, on a daily basis – and we are very pleased with their response. We want to hear from the private sector about: how the economic crisis is impacting them; what are the challenges they experience; what are the solutions they propose; and which are the opportunities they see. Only through this open dialogue we can move forest policy forward. It is with this idea in mind, and to better clarify the mandate of the UNECE in the forest area that the Committee changed its name from the Timber Committee to the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry. This new name rightly stresses the Committee’s focus on the inter-linkages between the ecosystem and its sustainable use, and stresses that the work of the United Nations in the pan-European region is open to and needs the input from the sector as a whole and all its stakeholders.

Last, but certainly not least, this meeting highlights the importance of UN organizations and specialized agencies working together in synergy. This meeting would not have reached

this magnitude and this level of outreach without the joint efforts of UNECE and FAO. I think it is of paramount importance to recognize the key role that these two organizations play, working together, in the pan-European region. Their combined efforts, through the joint UNECE-FAO Forestry and Timber Section, have played a key role in our region for the last 60 years and now, in particular, it is essential to gather all forest stakeholders around the same table and advance forest policy and action in the region. As many of you, member States, have stressed during the recent FAO and the UNECE review processes, we are proud to be able to report to you that our joint work saves you money, avoids programmatic overlaps, allows a better coverage of forest-related matters from forestry to products, and most importantly delivers effectively. There are no doubts about the effectiveness of good cooperation and we believe that, through our joint FAO/UNECE section in Geneva, both organizations gain from the strengths of the other. We see this meeting and this week as a testimony to this cooperation and the benefits that it brings to all stakeholders and we, in UNECE look forward to continuing and strengthening this partnership still further.

In closing, please allow me to once again thank you, Minister Koskinen, and our Finnish colleagues for a wonderful job in organizing this meeting. I wish you every success and I look forward to hearing about and, over the coming years, seeing the results of your work.

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