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Meeting with the Chair of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry Report by the Chair

Executive Summary

In November 2024, The Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry convened its annual session, hosting its first ever Deforestation-Free Trade Dialogue. This event was attended by over 250 participants, including high-level representatives from the Geneva trade community, international organizations, and various countries and private entities. The high relevance and the increasing interconnectedness of deforestation, trade and climate change led the Committee to include the topic in its 2026 programme of work.

The Committee further examined the critical role of forests in the ECE region in addressing climate change, adaptation, and resilience worldwide. ECE's new study on boreal forests, supported by firsthand evidence from ECE member States, underscores the global significance of the region's forests. The Committee strongly endorses this work and its dissemination at international climate, biodiversity, and desertification forums.

Aligning local actions with national and international objectives is a key focus area for the Committee, with strong relevance to the three Rio Conventions. Therefore, the Committee has intensified its focus on urban areas in 2024 through various high-profile initiatives.

Further to the high-level theme of the seventieth Commission session, "Digital and green transformations towards sustainable development in the ECE region", the Committee has also placed great emphasis on digitalization work with forest information systems, the automation of data collection processes and data availability on INForest, ECE's digital forest data platform.

I. Introduction

1. The Chair of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry (COFFI) of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Mr. Tomas Krejzar (Czech Republic), is pleased to submit his report to the 138th meeting of the Executive Committee (EXCOM) on 15 January 2025.

2. This report highlights some of the key achievements of the Integrated Programme of Work (IPoW) 2022-2025 (ECE/TIM/2021/2– FO:EFC/2021/2), which was adopted by the joint session of the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry and the FAO European Forestry Commission (EFC) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, Italy, on 25 November 2021. The report focuses on the main achievements of COFFI over the past twelve months, as well as major activities planned for 2025. Detailed information on the activities and plans of the Committee and its subsidiary bodies is contained in the report of the eighty-second session of COFFI, which was held in Geneva, Switzerland from 13 to 15 November 2024 (see document ECE/TIM/2024/2).¹

3. The Committee's cross-cutting mandate and work contributes to strengthening the sustainable management of trees and forests and enhancing the contribution of forests and forest products to sustainable development, climate action and biodiversity in the ECE region. These are of key relevance for addressing major regional and global challenges related to growing threats caused by climate change, disturbances, and damage of man-made and natural causes. agricultural and urban expansion as well as scarcity of resources. It delivers on its mandate through policy guidance, research, exchange of good practice and capacity building. The Committee supports the achievement of SDGs, especially Goals 7, 11, 12, 13 and 15. The Committee works at regional, national and local levels and coordinates its actions in partnership with FAO as well as the United National Forum for Forests (UNFF).

II. Achievements over the past twelve months

A. Climate Change and Forest Ecosystems in the ECE Region

4. The Committee promoted climate action focusing on adaptation and mitigation measures to increase forest resilience in all its forests. The joint FAO/ECE Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management (Joint Working Party) in 2024 featured the first dedicated discussion on the topic whose relevance to the forest sector was also stressed by the Committee in November 2024 at its annual session.

5. Climate change poses significant threats to forests and forest ecosystems across the ECE region. Over 40% of the world's forests are situated within ECE member states. These forests represent an asset in global climate action efforts. However, over the past three decades, the region has experienced substantial forest damage owing to factors such as drought, fire, storms, and insect infestations. These events have resulted in widespread tree mortality and altered forest landscapes, impacting timber markets. Climate change is expected to further exacerbate these challenges through increased temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and elevated carbon dioxide concentrations. These changes are likely to aggravate existing challenges and lead to accelerated ecological changes, including increased frequency and intensity of wildfires, insect outbreaks, and extreme weather events.

6. To address the challenges posed by climate change, the Committee emphasized the importance of adaptation and resilience-building measures. These measures will be highlighted at COP30 to underscore the significant impacts of forest degradation in non-tropical regions and their global consequences. The Committee also conducted a thorough assessment of the effects of climate change on the boreal biome, the region's northernmost forests. Through dedicated sessions at the Joint Working Party and the Committee's annual

¹ <https://unece.org/info/Forests/events/386478>

session, the Committee examined existing and planned measures by member states to address these challenges. The Committee will prioritize increased monitoring efforts to be adopted by the 2025 session, focusing on forest damage and disturbances, as well as capacity-building initiatives to combat fires and develop effective coping strategies. Additionally, the Committee's work on urban nature has recognized the critical role of urban forests in adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change. This work is in keeping with the high-level theme of the seventieth session of the Commission, "Climate action and resilient infrastructure for sustainable development", to be held in April 2025.

B. Enhanced Focus on Urban Forestry

7. In 2024, the Committee significantly expanded its work on urban trees and forests, building upon the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Action Plan (adopted at its 2023 session). This included strengthening multi-level governance linkages between local, national, regional, and international levels. Additionally, the Trees in Cities Challenge substantially increased the number of participating cities and exceeded its target of planting 19 million trees. This high-impact initiative has proven to be a powerful accelerator for localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide. The establishment of the Trees in Dry Cities Coalition and the UN Petite Forest Network further solidified the focus on urban and peri-urban trees and forests. Consequently, there has been a surge in demand for expertise, dedicated events, and discussions on trees as nature-based solutions for climate action, health, well-being, and carbon sequestration in cities.

8. To support these efforts and address the growing needs of local and regional governments in the ECE region, significant capacity-building initiatives have been undertaken. Moreover, the development of essential guidance materials has been prioritized to provide practical support for implementing urban and rural forestry projects.

C. Forest products and Deforestation-free trade

9. Over 40 percent of the world's forests are located in ECE member States, and these forests are largely managed sustainably. Additionally, 60 percent of the wood fibers used in products worldwide originate from the ECE region. Approximately three-quarters of all forests in this region are certified by third-party certification schemes for sustainable forest management. While these statistics speak to the impressive strides made in the sustainable management of forests and minimal deforestation within the ECE region, there remains the threat of indirect deforestation through the import, processing, and consumption of goods whose production may be linked to deforestation. Key commodities such as soy, palm oil, cocoa, coffee, rubber, cattle, and wood-based products are at the forefront of this issue. In response to this challenge many countries in the ECE region have started to develop measures to reduce or eliminate deforestation from their trade. Wood-based products can account for often half of the total trade value of the commodities covered by such regulations.

10. Therefore, the Committee recognizes its important role in providing a platform to discuss matters such as deforestation-free trade as well current trends and policies that will shape the future of the forest and forest-based sectors in the ECE region, while leading by example and dialogue.

11. The Committee hosted a dedicated dialogue session in November 2024 at its annual session and decided to ask the secretariat for follow-up discussion and events in 2025, recognizing ECE member States' leadership in promoting sustainable wood products.

III. Major activities planned for 2025 and beyond

12. Given the strategic priorities of the Committee's work programme, major activities for 2024 were strategically aligned to support member States in their efforts to meet the global climate and forest goals. Therefore, upcoming events (intergovernmental or other) will include segments or focus on areas that contribute to the implementation of global, regional, national and local frameworks. Also, the finalization of the new Integrated Programme of

Work (FAO EFC and ECE COFFI) 2026-2029 will be an important focus of 2025 until its adoption in November 2025 at the Joint session..

13. The intergovernmental frameworks will include strong thematic focus on issues of strategic regional and global relevance including sessions on Forests for Climate (Joint ECE/FAO Working Party session) and follow-up to the 2024 Deforestation-free trade session at the Joint session 2025.

14. Issue-focused events will be centered around climate adaptation, forest resilience and biodiversity mainstreaming contributing to the Rio conventions and the Paris agreements (among others); urban action (from local to national to global impact) ranging from nature based solutions to finance and addressing food security through food trees in and around cities; monitoring damages to ECE forests to future-proofing their sustainable management and resilience; data and digitalization for evidence-based policy making in a challenging global environmental context and green transition as well as the links between forest and wood products and their availability for innovative use and substitution solutions in all areas. Examples include:

- Climate adaptation events
- The state of forests in the ECE region – study and event
- International Day of Forests – Forest and food 21 March 2024.
- Trees in Cities – summit of 90 cities having pledged to plant over 19 million trees.
- Trees in Dry Cities Coalition events on drought management and financing
- May 2025 United Nations Forum for Forests (UNFF).
- Workshops on the operationalization of the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Action Plan adopted by COFFI in November 2023;
- Future-proofing sustainable forest management in ECE forests – damages and disturbances monitoring – event
- Non-wood forest value chains in Central Asia and the Caucasus – national and regional review and capacity-building events.
- Trade and resource management in light of growing demand pressures for forest products, events centered around forthcoming studies.
- Global Forest resource assessment and its pan-European component - Data for evidence-based policymaking.

IV. Any proposed change to the subsidiary structure of the Committee

15. The Committee does not propose any changes to its subsidiary structure. During its eighty-second session in Geneva from 13 to 15 November 2024, the Committee adopted the programme of work of the Forests and the Forest Industry Subprogramme for 2025, as contained in document ECE/TIM/2024/5. The organizational structure of the Committee is presented in the annex to this report.

V. Follow-up to the 2023 session of the Economic Commission for Europe

16. The Committee and its subsidiary bodies delivered on the cross-cutting theme of the 2023 session of ECE, “Digital and green transformations for sustainable development in the ECE region” within their mandate. In addition to the focus areas mentioned above, the deliverables included the following:

- (a) Automation of the collection and processing of data from member States.
- (b) Guides on Forest Information Systems – with step-by-step training modules.

(c) A guide and workshop on nature-based solutions in cities for increased food security and an application to analyze and prevent food loss and waste.

(d) INForest platform on continued automation and presentation of forest related data from all ECE member States.

VI. Intersectoral activities: new activities and/or progress in existing intersectoral activities

17. The Forest and Forest Industry subprogramme continued to provide important opportunities for intersectoral collaboration to address the global, regional and national challenges faced by member States, international organizations, formal or informal working groups, private sector firms, academia, and scientists throughout the ECE region. The Committee's subsidiary bodies in particular, the Joint Working Party as well as its Teams of Specialists and informal groups (such as the Informal Network of Experts on Urban Nature) are at the forefront of building interfaces between the science and policy community. Some examples which highlight the relevance of this cooperation include:

18. Cross-sectoral cooperation with the ECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management, on greening cities and urban nature;

19. The work on nexuses, for example on the energy-forest nexus, the water-forest nexus or the food-water-energy nexus (in cities) to strengthen synergies within ECE and thereby scale up efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and other global goals;

20. Intersectoral work also involves cooperation with the relevant ECE Divisions, including the Environment and the Sustainable Energy Divisions

21. The Committee looks forward to cooperating with other sectoral committees on the new cross-cutting theme of the 2025 Commission session ECE on "Climate action and resilient infrastructure for a sustainable future."

VII. Technical cooperation activities

22. In the past twelve months, to implement the Committee's work programme, the ECE secretariat held in total 25 capacity-building events, meetings and webinars and carried out extensive technical cooperation activities. Through extrabudgetary projects the ECE secretariat actively provided technical assistance and capacity-building support in coordination with United Nations country teams and resident agencies. Trainings were held in the programme countries as well as back-to-back with regular meetings online and in person. These were organized at the request of member States to support them in their green and sustainable transition and were fully aligned with the work programme as well as global climate, biodiversity, nature and forest goals. As part of the Integrated Program of work of ECE and FAO, training focused on programmatic issues and on data collection, data processing and forest information systems. In addition, studies were disseminated and capacity-building events were also held in the margins of major global meetings such as UNFF or COP-16 (Biodiversity, Cali), COP-29 (Climate, Baku) and COP-16 (Drought and Desertification, Riyadh).

(a) Examples such of capacity-building and technical cooperation activities include thematic focuses on e.g. Climate and Forests, (Geneva, Switzerland, May 2024), Forest, fires and preventive actions (Antalya, Türkiye, July 2024); Climate actions in cities, (Baku, Azerbaijan, November 2024) ; Trees in dry cities as a fundamental climate and SDG solution (4 events); UN Petite forests (2 events online and in Utrecht, Netherlands, September 2024); Support to master planning reforestation in Uzbekistan (September and November 2024); Nature-based solutions for food security in cities, (October 2024, Tirana, Albania); Circular approaches to the forest bioeconomy (December, 2024); Circular forest products for the construction sector (online, October 2024); Non-wood forest products (15 November, 2024, Geneva, Switzerland), Forest and innovations – seminar and practical demonstrations (Geneva, Switzerland, 21 March 2024); Forests and Fashion (Florence, Italy; October 2024).

(b) Guides and training material on forest information systems and the role of wood in the construction sector as well as edible cities and food trees.

(c) Assessment and data to inform future trainings and targeted action on non-wood forest value chains, sustainable management of boreal forests as well as food availability mapping in cities.

VIII. Cooperation with other organizations

23. The Committee's programme of work is also implemented via an Integrated Programme of Work coordinated jointly with FAO. This long-standing cooperation reinforces stakeholder engagement, scope, impact and outreach. It is formalized via a Partnership Agreement between ECE and FAO and the ECE/FAO Joint Office hosted by ECE. The ECE Forest and Bioeconomy Section works consistently and effectively with many other international organizations at international, national, regional and local levels to reinforce impact and delivery and create economies of scale and resource savings. Cooperation is strategically aligned with support for the work programme implementation, but also the global agendas and related challenges to support member States within an optimal use of resources and shared agendas. Some of the 2024 highlights included:

- European Forest Alliance: established at the 2022 COFFI session, the European Forest Alliance (currently chaired by ECE) is an informal mechanism enabling exchanges on current developments and coordinating joint work of all major European Forest organizations (ECE, FAO, European Forest Institute Integrate Network, European Environment Agency, and Forest Europe). In 2024, the Alliance held two consultative meetings, organized a joint social media campaign on forest resilience and discussed expertise on forest genetic resources.
- Cooperation with the secretariats of the three Rio Conventions (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) to enhance impact and relevance of the Committee's work in light of the triple planetary crisis and highlight the important role of forest in addressing these challenges.
- Pan-European reporting on forests and sustainable forest management: A collective effort of ECE, FAO and the Forest Europe process, it includes technical guidance and trainings of national statistical contributors from Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and processing and disseminating the collected data. At the global level ECE cooperates with FAO through the Collaborative Forest Resources Questionnaire – an initiative of regional organizations (ECE, Forest Europe, Montreal Process, Central African Forest Commission and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO)).
- Intersecretariat Working Group on Forest Sector Statistics: ECE coordinated the Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire amongst the 4 participating organizations: ECE/FAO, Eurostat, ITTO and FAO. The data were provided to the Intersecretariat member organizations and published keeping in mind the aim of producing the best forest products statistics possible with optimized resource use.
- UN Country teams and resident agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), on capacity- building, particularly in Central Asia (Uzbekistan where a Joint capacity- building project development is implemented) and the Caucasus region.
- Forest Europe Liaison Unit Bonn: ECE contributes to many activities of the Forest Europe Work Programme, including the joint ECE/FAO/Forest Europe Forest data collection and support to a report on the State of Europe's Forests as well as joint development of the interactive data platforms.
- International Energy Agency , FAO and the European Commission on the "Joint Wood Energy Enquiry", for improved understanding of wood energy production and

consumption and joint assessment of the future prospects for wood energy in the ECE region.

- Steering Committee of the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion: ECE promoted the use of sustainable forest fibers in the garment sector in meetings. Members of the Steering Committee include representatives from: the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, International Trade Centre, FAO, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development , the UNDP, United Nations Office for Partnerships , International Labour Organization and the Global Compact.
- Cooperation on monitoring of forest resources and sustainable forest management: in cooperation with Forest Europe, the European Union (i.e., Eurostat, the European Environment Agency, and the Joint Research Centre), and other organizations (i.e., the Confederation of European Forest Owners, the International Union of Forest Research Organizations, the European Forest Institute, and European State Forest Association) in this area.

24. The Committee secretariat cooperates closely with the Regional Commissions of the United Nations and the Committee's secretariat acts as focal point for the inter-regional coordination on biodiversity work.

Annex

