



# EARTH SUMMIT+5

Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise  
the Implementation of Agenda 21

## **United Nations Panel Proposes Action to Implement Earth Summit Forest Accords Governments agree to continue dialogue towards international convention on forests**

New York, 21 February 1997 -- A high-level panel set up by the United Nations to promote sustainable management of forests in all parts of the world today put forward far-reaching proposals for action on a broad range of issues which will go a long way in improving the state of the world's forests.

The Panel's conclusions reflect how the issue of forests, which was contentious and difficult at the 1992 Rio Conference, is now one that governments can discuss and begin to reach agreement on. The Panel urged countries and international organizations to immediately implement the set of Proposals for Action negotiated over the past two years and adopted by the Panel today.

"The result is an enormous advance on the Earth Summit", stated Mr Manuel Rodriguez-Becerra of Colombia, Co-Chairman of the Panel. "At Rio, countries were suspicious of one another and hesitant to agree on even a very broad set of principles for sustainable forest management. Here the atmosphere has been positive."

One of the important issues discussed by the Panel was the need for the development of a legal mechanism concerned with forests, possibly a convention. After much debate, the Panel agreed that there are three possible options to continue a dialogue on forests: one, to continue debate in existing UN bodies; two, to continue discussions in a forum dedicated to an international level forest debate, keeping the issue of a convention under particular scrutiny; and three, to start negotiations for a convention on forests immediately. These three options will be debated during the upcoming United



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Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), in New York from 7 to 25 April, and by the United Nations General Assembly at a special session to review the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit, in New York, from 23 to 27 June. The special session is known as Earth Summit +5.

"A Convention may well come into being in due course", said Sir Martin Holdgate, of the United Kingdom, Co-Chairman of the Panel. "But for now, we have many useful things to do, which could not have gained the impetus they now have, had it not been for the Panel."

While support for a convention was strong among some countries heavily involved in forest activities, others remained unconvinced of the need for an additional agreement governing the use of forests.

Major environmental non-governmental organizations spoke out against new negotiations. "We do not need to be thinking about a new process. What we need now is commitment for action on the proposals we have, targets for implementation and agreement about how they will be monitored ", stated William E. Mankin of the Global Forest Project at the close of the session.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Forests was set up by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1995 to promote international dialogue and action on all types of forests, in response to growing public concern about continuing deforestation and forest degradation. The Panel, which held four negotiating sessions, concluded its work this evening.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), some 200 million hectares of forests were destroyed between 1980 and 1995. At the same time, 20 million hectares of forest plantations were established. During its deliberations, plantations were seen by the Panel both as a means for



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reducing pressures on natural forests but also as a threat to biodiversity and other non-economic services if used to replace natural forests

In the Proposals for Action adopted today, the Panel recommended that all countries formulate national forest action programmes, as a basis for sustainable forest management activities; use its "diagnostic tool kit" to determine the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation; promote the incorporation of traditional forest-related knowledge in forest programmes; and reduce the impact of international trade and patterns of consumption and production on forests. It also stressed the importance of the multiple benefits provided simultaneously by forests, and encouraged the development of criteria for defining sustainable forest management and indicators to measure its attainment.

## **Major Issues**

### **Sustainable Forest Management**

At the Earth Summit, Governments recognized that forests not only produce timber; they are vital for meeting a diverse range of human needs. Since then, discussions have evolved from the management of forests to ensure the sustained yield of wood to ecosystem management aimed at sustaining the multiple benefits of forests such as regulating the flow of rivers, conserving soil and water, providing habitats for biological diversity, meeting the subsistence needs of peoples living in and around forests, as "sinks" for carbon dioxide produced by industrialization and as recreational areas.

In order to facilitate the management of forests in an integrated, holistic and sustainable manner, the Panel asked Governments to formulate national action programmes that take into account competing demands on land, including human settlements and agriculture. It also requested FAO to carry out a



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new assessment of the state of the world's forests in the year 2000.

## **Criteria and Indicators**

Underlying efforts to ensure the sustainability of forests is the development of criteria that define what a sustainably managed forest looks like and indicators to monitor the state of a country's forests or its forest management.

In its Proposals for Action, the Panel emphasized that criteria and indicators could play a role in forest certification and product-labeling schemes but were intended primarily to promote and monitor sustainable forest management. They should not be used as a basis for restricting trade. The Panel stressed the need for internationally acceptable definitions of key concepts and terms for criteria and indicators, and for methods of data collection. Significant progress has been made since Rio on developing criteria and indicators at the national and regional level. The Panel called on countries to use these, even if they were still "imperfect and incomplete", and to continue their development.

## **Legal Convention on Forests**

An international legal agreement on forests is sometimes referred to as the "missing Rio convention" (the others address climate change, biodiversity and desertification). At the Earth Summit, many tropical countries opposed a convention on forests which, they felt, would limit their ability to develop their natural resources. The non-legally binding Forest Principles adopted in Rio referred to all types of forests and emphasized national sovereignty over forests. Since Rio, Governments have come to recognize the role to be played by forests in all areas of the world and a growing number support work towards a convention.



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Countries opposed to beginning negotiations at this time include Australia, Brazil, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Japan, the United States and Venezuela. Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia and the European Union support a convention. Canada and the European Union, both of which have large timber industries dependent on international trade, are pressing for a legal agreement which would set out internationally accepted standards and enable them to operate within a legally sanctioned trading environment. Non-governmental organizations opposed to a convention consider that negotiations at this early stage would result in a weak agreement. This, they state, would be both "bad politics and, worse, bad for forests".

## **Trade and Environment -- Certification and Labeling Programmes**

The Panel recognized the importance of promoting sustainable forest management through mutually supportive trade and environment practices, and of avoiding policies that adversely impact on the sustainable development of forests. Products from sustainably managed forests could be considered "environmentally-friendly", it noted.

Voluntary certification and labeling schemes -- sometimes called "eco-labeling" -- are being promoted by some Governments and environmental organizations, mostly in developed countries, as a means for encouraging sustainability by permitting buyers to purchase timber and other forest products that are produced from sustainably managed forests.

The Panel assessed the value and impact of such schemes on sustainable forest practices. It found that, because of a lack of information and relatively few "real world experiences", it was too early to assess their full potential. However, it concluded that they were a potentially useful tool for promoting sustainable forest management. There was a need for



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comparable standards and mutual recognition. Governments are called on to encourage transparency and open access to the schemes which should be transparent and cost-effective.

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