Helsinki, 2 March, 2007

Mr. Mogens Peter Carl
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Environment Directorate-General
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B-1049 Brussels
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Subject: **Vision of a future European Forest Monitoring System - Position paper by the Steering Committee of Cost Action E43**

As convened in Vienna, 22-23 February, 2007

Copy to:

- Mr. José Manuel Silva Rodríguez, Director General, DG Research, European Commission
- Mr. Jean-Luc Demarty, Director General, DG Agriculture, European Commission
- Mr. Michael Hamell, Head of Unit, DG Environment, European Commission
- Mr. Robert Flies, Advisor, DG Environment, European Commission
- Mr. Patrick Murphy, Head of Unit, DG Environment, European Commission
- Dr. Richard Lammel, Director of Directorate Forestry, Forest Industries, Wildlife Management, Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, Germany
- Mr. Aarne Reunala, Director General, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland
- Mr. Gerhard Mannsberger, Head of Department of Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, 1012 Vienna, Austria
- Mr. Günter Siegel, Science officer of COST Action E43

Dear Mr. Carl,

Following our letter to you of 25 August, 2006, we would urgently like to draw to your attention our further views concerning the monitoring of forests in Europe.

Background

Following the closure of Forest Focus, there have been discussions concerning how to develop a European Forest Monitoring System (EFMS). The system generally is envisioned as a bottom-up structure, building on existing forest monitoring programmes in the EU member states. Thus, National Forest Inventories (NFIs) are likely to play an important role.

In this paper, the Steering Committee of Cost Action E43 – as a representative of the European NFIs – would like to clarify its position regarding the role of NFIs and other inventories in a future EFMS. Closer collaboration between European NFIs was initiated in 2003 through the establishment of the European National Forest Inventory Network (ENFIN); since 2004 the

activities largely have been carried out within the framework of Cost Action E43 (www.metla.fi.eu/cost/e43/), aiming at harmonising the reporting from European NFIs.

Rationale of a bottom-up EFMS

The European Union has no common forest policy. Thus, decision makers within the member states make most of the relevant political and corporate decisions about forests and forestry. The decisions rely on forest information adapted to the needs and special conditions in the different countries, including time series data according to consistent definitions. The EU member states each year invest large amounts of money into the provision this type of forest information.

However, there is an increasing need for forest information also at the level of the EU. For example, the EU, as well as its member states, is a party to several international conventions and similar agreements requiring harmonised information. EU policy within the environmental field also demands European-level forest information. Further, corporate decisions increasingly benefit from multinational information due to the globalisation process.

Adequate forest information at all decision making levels can be obtained by structuring a future EFMS in a bottom-up fashion, where the backbones is the national programmes providing specific information at this level. By harmonising the output of core variables from the national programmes towards agreed-upon reference definitions, relevant information will also be obtained at the level of the EU.

A EFMS structured in this way thus would provide relevant information at all levels, avoid costly overlaps, and benefit from consistent information across all scales.

A future EFMS - requirements

A distinction must be made between information for strategic policy decisions and information for operational decisions. Whereas the latter often requires complete-cover information for identifying all relevant objects, the former generally requires trust worthy information as totals, averages, and changes at larger scale. It is not up to policy makers to monitor the behaviour of individual forest owners, but instead the overall performance within larger areas.

Comparable information needs to be available from all parts of the EU and thus a future EFMS must be based on inventories in all member states.

Further, a new EFMS should cover a wide range of forest variables, e.g. all relevant indicators identified within the MCPFE process. Narrow approaches focusing only on selected issues like forest biodiversity, forest carbon pools, or forest health condition, should be avoided in order to optimise the use of available resources. This is due to the fact that indicators from seemingly very different fields in general all are based on the same type of basic measurements of trees, stands, other vegetation, site conditions, and soils on sample plots.

Whereas there is also a need for improved knowledge from forest research, it is unclear whether it is the role of a future EFMS or research funding agencies to sponsor the acquisition of such data.

Structuring a future EFMS

NFIs and ICP Forests level I inventories are conducted in most countries. Both types of surveys in principle can provide information relevant for strategic level decisions. However, in general the NFI networks are much denser (order of 500 000 field plots at the EU level) compared to the ICP Forests network (about 6000 plots). Thus, the NFI estimates have significantly higher accuracy. In

addition, the NFIs in general provide long time series of data for large set of forest characteristics. On the other hand, the ICP Forests level I plots generally are revisited with a higher frequency than the NFI plots.

The position of the Steering Committee of COST Action E43 is that there is a need for structuring and harmonising forest inventory activities in the member states of the European Union. Clearly it is a waste of money if several systems, providing about the same type of information, are run in parallel. Thus, to build a future EFMS the following generic steps are conceived to be necessary:

1) Identify the strategic level forest inventories going on in each member state. In case there is only one such inventory, proceed to step 3.
2) When several strategic level inventories exist, there is a need to make a decision at the country level about how the efforts can be merged so that the inventories no longer run in parallel[1]. One solution is to move all measurements/assessments to one of the programmes or to merge the programmes into a common organisational structure. (Of course, a third solution is to continue with several inventories in case it is judged to be necessary given the specific country conditions.)
3) Each national programme should continue to interact closely with its primary users, i.e. the decision makers at the national level. Output that fits the national needs is of prime importance.
4) The national programmes must participate in a harmonisation process at the EU level, aiming at identifying and harmonising core variables needed for EU level reporting and decisions. These variables need to be covered by all the national programmes and also regularly to be recalculated to a common EU level reference. To achieve this, it is likely that coordinated national and EU level work programmes must be initiated.
5) Agreements must be made between the national programmes and some coordination body at the EU level regarding data analysis and delivery of information to the EU level system. It is reasonable that the national programmes are involved in data analysis and reporting in order to secure correct analyses and interpretation of results.

In many countries, the natural choice would be to link all needed measurements into the NFI system. For example, sample based NFIs are ongoing or have recently been conducted in 24 out of 27 countries participating in COST E43, covering the majority of the forest land of Europe. In countries where no NFI exists, a straightforward solution would be to build on the ICP Forests level I network of plots. Either way, all national programmes need to participate in a harmonisation process at the EU level. In this process people from NFIs as well as ICP Forests groups would be natural partners.

Efforts must be made to avoid a development where several initiatives are being developed independently. Such a development would be contra-productive to the long-term goal of securing a provision of relevant forest information to decision makers at all levels across the EU.

[1] As an example, in Sweden forest condition assessments for the reporting to ICP Forests/LRTAP have been fully merged into the NFI from 2007onwards.

Activities needed (related to NFIs)

- Processes must be initiated in the member states in order to structure ongoing forest monitoring activities. In most cases this concerns a discussion between NFIs and ICP Forests level I inventories.
- An EU level work programme for harmonising core variables must be initiated. This programme needs to involve national inventory programmes in all European countries. Further, work should build on the results from ongoing harmonisation projects.
- A work programme for technical collaboration between national programmes would also be important. Especially, such a work programme could provide support to countries within the area of forest inventory and analysis. Issues covered could span from inventory design to database design and analysis of data.
- Concrete project proposals should be developed for harmonised European forest information to support the reporting obligations and decision making process in different thematic areas like timber resources, climate change and biodiversity.

Yours sincerely,

For the Steering Committee of COST E43

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