

FOREST EUROPE

Expert Level Meeting (ELM)

9/10 January 2024

Venue: Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Bonn, Germany

MINUTES

1. Opening of the meeting

The representative of the Chair country of the Forest Europe (FE) process, Mr. Schwoerer and the Head of the Liaison Unit Bonn (LUBo), Mr. Haußmann welcomed the participants. The ELM approved the proposal by Mr. Schwoerer, to accept Sweden's offer (Mrs. Reinholdsson) to serve as co-chair of this meeting.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted without any changes.

3. Membership in the GCC from 2025 onwards and funding of the process

Mr. Haußmann presented a brief overview with the history of the process and the past GCC memberships including chairmanship as well as the current situation with Türkiye's decision to leave the GCC (letter by Minister Yumakli of 6.9.2023). He mentioned that the number of GCC countries varies and current composition of GCC is the following: Germany (current chair), Slovak Republic (former chair, leaving the GCC end 2024) and Sweden. In the light of the pending decision on the future membership of the GCC, he also stressed that there is an urgency to revise the current working modalities and pointed at agenda item 4.1 in that context.

Mr. Schwoerer underlined the challenges for the future of the FOREST EUROPE process that this situation is causing. He asked Sweden's representative to comment on the possibility to become the next FOREST EUROPE chair already from 2025 onwards.

Ms. Reinholdsson stated that Sweden is dedicated together with the other GCC members to find a solution, and added that Sweden is currently examining potential possibilities to become next chair. Further information will be given once a formal decision has been made.

Mr. Schwoerer asked to accelerate the process as far as possible as time is short and the next Ministerial Conference soon coming up where participants would expect this question to be solved. He offered Germany's support notably for a transition phase. On this occasion, he also urged all signatories to think of how to contribute to the process as ownership is the key for a joint success, not only in the next years but for the future in general.



Following this request, the United Kingdom expressed their readiness to join the GCC from 2025 onwards, appreciating the flexibility of the expected new working modalities. While not making a financial commitment now, the United Kingdom announced a general willingness for in-kind contributions (e.g. support in holding Forest Risk Facility (FoRISK) workshops in Edinburgh).

The delegate from Albania announced the readiness of his country to become a GCC member from 2025 and stressed the importance of revising the working modalities as a precondition for Albania's engagement.

Mr. Schwoerer commented that with the United Kingdom as a more western and Albania as a more south-eastern country regional balance would be ensured also in future in the steering body and thanked both delegations for their announcements. He added that a more formal decision for the next GCC members from 2025 onwards could be prepared for the next ELM and then presented to the Ministers in October.

Mr. Haußmann provided an update on the financial situation which is currently difficult due to only three GCC countries contributing. LUBo is reducing the budget where possible without too much compromising on implementation of the work programme. He thanked those signatories which financially contributed to the Multi-Donor Trust Fund in 2023 namely Spain, Estonia, Switzerland and the Slovak Republic (on top of their GCC contribution), **by Switzerland for the EFI work at the FORESTA conference in San Marion**, as well as in-kind contributions from many other observer and signatories. He underlined that continued support will be needed in the future.

Mr Schwoerer stressed to keep in mind that only with sufficient contributions the work programme can be implemented.

4. Preparation of the 9th Ministerial Conference (MC9)

4.1 Zero draft of the Bonn Ministerial declaration including its annex “working modalities”

Before opening the discussions on substance, Mr Schwoerer outlined the next steps of the negotiation process. The comments at this ELM will be considered and cleared as far as possible, then LUBo after consulting GCC will send out the revised documents (version 2) for a written procedure (6 weeks' time approx.). The updated documents (version 3) will definitely need to be finalised at the next ELM (June 2024, near Munich). He made clear that after the ELM in June there would hardly be any options to deal with further changes as the Ministerial documents need to get their final layout and transferred to all Ministers for their signature at the Ministerial Conference. Therefore, he asked signatories and observers to be mindful of the options presented.

Following an introduction of the document by Mr. Haußmann signatories expressed general support for the document, incl. its annex, and its importance for securing the future of FOREST EUROPE. Ireland mentioned that they are not in the position to join GCC currently,



but if the new working modalities were adopted, Ireland could possibly make a financial contribution to the process. Switzerland commented on the need for added value for ministers and importance of keeping document short and concise. Italy stated that their national forest strategy has been revised the past years also based on the Forest Europe definitions and criteria and indicators. Also, a financial contribution will be verified in future. Spain expressed general support for FOREST EUROPE, especially for presenting the data and results in the report “State of Europe’s forests” and establishing a Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF). The EC stressed the importance of a positive signal in view of Türkiye’s withdrawal from GCC and that the process should use this decision as a positive momentum to move ahead into the future. It was important for the ministers to see the added value of the process beyond the work within the EU (e.g. with the United Kingdom and Albania as non-EU countries joining the GCC); the ministerial documents could be even more accentuated. The International Forest Student Organisation (IFSA) thanked for the support of this process to get the young generation involved in the policy process and the need to continue capacity building. IFSA stated readiness to contribute to the further work of FOREST EUROPE. IUFRO expressed general support, suggesting the important role of science to be better reflected in the document. **UNECE invited Forest Europe signatories to consider organizing future Ministerial Conferences jointly with the UNECE Committee on Forests and Forest Industries (COFFI). Such meetings would benefit access to meeting resources accessible to COFFI, such as meeting rooms and interpretation services into English, French and Russian at the premises in Geneva.** ~~UNECE offered that meetings could be jointly organised with the Committee on Forests and Forest Industries (COFFI) in order to save costs and offering premises in Geneva for future meetings (e.g. for ministerial or High-level policy dialogues).~~ The Schutzgemeinschaft Deutscher Wald (SDW) mentioned that green jobs and forest education are very important and there is a need for more acceptance in the society for this. In addition, they proposed to introduce forest education for sustainable development (ESD) into the documents.

During the following deliberations on the whole text (excluding the title), all comments from signatories and observers were taken note of and revised wordings were adopted in most cases. In all other cases at least agreements on the direction of change were reached.

Mr. Schwoerer expressed his thanks and satisfaction that signatories and observers had expressed ongoing strong support for the FOREST EUROPE process and specifically for the new working modalities as the precondition to make the process fit for the future.

4.2 Zero draft of the Bonn Ministerial decision including its annex “Terms of Reference FoRISK”

Following an introduction of the document by Ms. Julia Haas (LUBo), signatories shared general and, in all cases, supportive comments. Austria in addition asked to keep an eye on avoiding redundancy of the FoRISK work with already existing initiatives and on importance of collaboration with the research networks in this area. The delegate from the Turkish



Foresters' Foundation for a Green Türkiye stated that work of FoRISK is very important for his region and added that problems with sand and dust storms for southeast and southwest Europe could be included in the ministerial decision. The Czech Republic underlined its strong interest and support, which was inter alia expressed by having organised during the pilot phase a workshop on biotic agents effecting forests. The delegate from EUSTAFOR raised the question if the part in the Ministerial decision on Green Forest Jobs would not fit better in the Ministerial declaration. Mr. Haußmann replied that it is in line with the decision taken during the last ELM in Dresden not to present a separate Ministerial document but better to add this very relevant topic to both Ministerial documents with the understanding that Green Forest Jobs should also be related to the resilience and the climate change challenges.

The European Forest Institute (EFI) expressed the readiness and willingness to host a future FoRISK secretariat at its regional office in Bonn. Mr. Marcus Lindner (EFI) explained that working facilities would be available, support by the EFI Bonn in terms of fund raising, communication and administration could be ensured, and the topic would fit well with the existing EFI work on forest resilience.

The delegation from Germany welcomed EFI's readiness to host a future FoRISK secretariat in Bonn. Germany is currently examining the possibility to expand Germany's long-standing financial support of EFI's regional office in the framework of the existing host country agreement to such a facility. At the same time, Mr. Steven Dörr made clear that such a potential funding could only secure a core functioning of such a small secretariat while financing of a work programme activities would still depend on further contributions from all signatories.

Switzerland mentioned that forest risks are one of the biggest challenges in the region but also at European level. Switzerland therefore is in favour of continuation the FoRISK work and deeming EFI as a great fit for a secretariat. Switzerland also appreciated the readiness of Germany to fund the core functioning if possible. **indicating the willingness also to verify possible Swiss contributions to this new FoRISK.**

After intensive discussions (title again excluded) all the comments from signatories and observers were taken note of. Revised wordings were adopted as far as possible. In all other cases at least agreements on the direction of change were reached.

Mr. Schwoerer concluded that signatories and observers expressed their full support for the plan to set up a Forest Risk Facility. Together with the offer from EFI to host this new facility in Bonn, the announcement of Germany to examine possible core funding and the willingness of other Signatories to co-fund the facility, this would mark a promising starting point for the new Facility.

4.3 Way forward to prepare MC9



Ms. Silvia Abruscato (LUBo) introduced the way forward to prepare the 9th Ministerial Conference and the ministerial documents (see annex attached). She also gave a glimpse of the MC9 agenda and announced that the next ELM will be taking place in Freising close to Munich at the beginning of June (physical only format to be confirmed).

The ELM took note of the information provided. Croatia, Mr. Srećko Juričić, asked for flexibility regarding the deadline for registration for the Ministers willing to participate as there will be elections in his country in September. Mr. Haußmann took this comment into account for further consideration.

5. Implementation of the Work Programme of FOREST EUROPE 2021 – 2024

Mr. Bernhard Wolfslehner (EFI FE team) presented the results of the implementation of the work programme in total and especially for the last year of the German chair, the results of the Think Tank and work on the C&I of sustainable forest management. Ms. Julia Haas gave an overview of the FoRISK activities during the pilot phase and added that the final evaluation report is in progress and will be sent to the FoRISK soon. She also outlined the way forward namely to organize another Expert Group Meeting and to prepare the transition plan of FoRISK and continue with the work on forest risks. Ms. Silvia Abruscato gave a brief overview on the work stream on Green Jobs and Forest Education (on behalf of Ms. Vera Steinberg and Ms. Juliet Achieng) and on the Rapid Response Mechanism (specifying the work done regarding support of the Ukraine forest sector). She introduced also the upcoming activities in 2024 for both work packages. Mr. Santiago Alarcon (EFI FE team) presented the activities done on the Communications side regarding the promotion of the FE work in 2023 and an overview of what is planned to highlight the Ministerial Conference before, during, and after the event on the website and social media. Details can be found in the attached annex.

FAO thanked LUBo especially for their work done to support the Ukraine forest sector during and after the war and in handing over the work to FAO for implementation. Mr. Ekrem Yazici (FAO) provided a brief outline of FAO's support to Ukraine forests and its forestry sector, specifying the publication of strategy to support Ukraine forestry with several priority areas the preparation of the donor conference to be held in Prague on 26/27 March 2024 and announced more information to come soon. The ELM thanked the Czech Republic for hosting this important meeting.

The delegate from Ukraine thanked LUBo and all its signatories and observers for the active support for his country and to FAO for continuation of the support. Mr. Ihor Buksha (Ukraine) thanked Germany for funding a project on the national forest inventory. He stressed the continued need for capacity building for professionals, and youth inclusion and the need for support in the research field. Mr. Matthias Schwoerer reminded all that awareness of the war, and its consequences should not fade away and expressed some concerns about the limited participation at the last FAO Donor conference in December, maybe due to late invitations. He encouraged signatories and observers to participate in the upcoming conference in March and examine concrete ways of support for the Ukraine forest



sector. He also mentioned the Ukraine Recovery Conference in June in Berlin which the forest sector should get involved in for cross-cutting issues like de-mining and reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure.

Ms. Dolores Belorechka (Bulgaria) thanked LUBo for all the work presented. Mr. Christoph Rullmann (SDW) announced a workshop on forest-based Education for Sustainable Development and related projects in 2024 and promised to provide additional information soon.

Mr. Haußmann thanked for all support to the work done by LUBO and highlighted especially the preparation of a FOREST EUROPE webinar on March 14th on forests and innovation, the motto of the International Day on Forests this year.

6. Any other business

The delegate from UNFF, Ms Barbara Tavola Jainchill, expressed gratitude to Germany and LUBo for all the work and provided information on the preparation for UNFF19 including the mid-term review on international arrangement on forests. The UNFF 19 session was announced to take place in New York in the first week of May.

Mr. Andras Szepesi from Hungary delivered a personal statement announcing his retirement and thanking for great collaboration. Mr. Haußmann on behalf of the whole group thanked Mr. Szepesi for his great input and support over so many years.

7. Closure of the meeting

Mr. Schwoerer and Mr. Haußmann briefly summarised the main outcome of the ELM and closed the meeting.

