

Canada's Objectives for the 6th Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF6)

Introduction

The sixth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF6) will take place in New York, February 13-24, 2006. UNFF5 (May 2005) was unable to reach agreement on strengthening the UNFF and did not produce a ministerial declaration. UNFF5 was essentially suspended, and it was agreed that UNFF6 will start its deliberations based on the draft Chair's text from UNFF5, which consists almost entirely of bracketed text.

Achieving a legally binding instrument (LBI) for forests has been a foreign policy goal for Canada since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. At that time, all G7 countries agreed on the need of an LBI.

Attempts to further the issue of a legally binding instrument for forests have taken place in three fora since Rio - the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF, 1995-1997), the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF, 1997-2000), and most recently the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF, 2000 - present). Throughout all of these processes, Canada has been pro-active in attempting to support the various fora, including a Canada-Malaysia initiative that led to the establishment of the IPF, co-organizing with Costa-Rica an intersessional initiative in support of IFF (that included ten meetings worldwide), active participation in expert meetings, "friends" meetings, development of non-papers, and financial contributions to facilitate participation from developing countries.

Most key countries are firmly entrenched in their positions both for an LBI (e.g., Canada) and against an LBI (e.g., Brazil, United States). Therefore any sort of compromise is unlikely. But, in the same way as there is no agreement on an LBI, there is no agreement on how best to continue the international forest process in order to make a difference. Many countries view UNFF6 as a critical junction in the international forest policy dialogue. Closing statements at UNFF5 indicated a broadly held sense of failure and a view that a significant opportunity to raise the international profile of forests had been lost. In general, it is felt the level of optimism that UNFF6 will result in an influential, action oriented process is relatively low.

Canada's UNFF6 Objectives

Essentially, the two options on the table for UNFF are a "strengthened" UNFF (ie, results based mandate, targets, voluntary agreements such as a code of conduct, regional thematic programs) or an LBI through the UNFF. As well, some countries have informally indicated that they would like UNFF continue as is - a dedicated forest issue discussion forum aimed at problem solving (such as improving national programs with new and creative solutions), and with an emphasis on the capacity of countries to make national commitments.

An LBI could still be a relevant way for Canada to achieve its international forest policy objectives regarding improving governance, achieving development goals and making progress towards addressing global forest issues (see Appendix I). Therefore, Canada's main objective at UNFF6 will be to seek agreement to launch negotiations of a legally binding instrument for forests.

Canada does not see continuing with the status quo (e.g., continuing UNFF as it stands) as an option. Canada wants an agreement at UNFF6 on a process that will raise the international profile of forests and enable progress being made on international forest policy issues.

It is expected that there will be considerable effort at UNFF6 spent on trying to get consensus to launch negotiations for a voluntary instrument (e.g., code of conduct). Canada does not believe there will be consensus to any agreement to develop a voluntary instrument, as those countries that are firmly against an LBI see a voluntary instrument as a stepping stone towards a legally binding instrument. Canada is no longer optimistic that any voluntary instrument that would be developed would be strong enough to have any impact, therefore believes that the negotiation of a voluntary instrument would be two or three more years where progress on international forestry issues would essentially be stalled, and would do little in practice to further Canada's international forest objectives.

Canada's Approach at UNFF6

The Canadian delegation will participate actively in discussions to reaffirm our commitment to sustainable forest management nationally and internationally. Canada will be making an opening statement at UNFF6 indicating our dedication to this process, but also noting that if UNFF does not achieve objectives which are of importance to Canada we shall probably seek other means, including activity outside UNFF.

In November 2005 and January 2006, Canada initiated a series of bilateral discussions with countries who have also supported launching negotiations of an LBI in the past. Canada used this opportunity to explore informally how other countries will be approaching UNFF6, and what they consider options for the future international arrangement on forests. Canada will continue these informal discussions while in NY.

Canadian Delegation

The Canadian delegation for UNFF6 will be considerably smaller than for other UNFF meetings. Officials from key departments (CFS-NRCan, Foreign Affairs, CIDA) will represent Canada at UNFF6. Two representatives from provincial governments will also attend UNFF6. A representative from the International Model Forest Network will also attend a portion of UNFF6.

Appendix I - Benefits of an LBI for Canada

- The world expects Canada to act responsibly, but at the same time, Canada can expect not to be disadvantaged by this. Clear and consistent objectives for forest management around the world, as well as definitions applicable to all forest nations would focus efforts and enhance the current momentum in dealing with forest issues, and integrate environmental, social and economic objectives;
- Defend allegations against Canada's forest sector by setting and meeting international standards for SFM;
- The importance of trade of forest products to Canada is sizable - we are highly dependent on global trade and have a large domestic industry, and we need to be involved in "setting the rules", instead of responding to rules others set (e.g., the European Union). Protecting, promoting and enhancing our interests regarding the forest sector is reasonable and expected;
- Canada wants to be in a position to drive forest management standards based on good science. By our involvement in the development of an LBI, we can influence the importance of science based decision making ;
- Failure to ensure SFM globally will undermine national initiatives, such as Canada's National Forest Strategy;
- Forests play a part in the debate of other international conventions (ie, climate change, biodiversity), but these debates do not focus on all aspects of sustainable forest management. It is in Canada's interest to look at forest issues as a whole.
- Support of Canada's International Policy Statement priorities of promoting good governance, encouraging the growth of the private sector, and environmental sustainability, with a global goal of poverty eradication are all directly linked to forestry. These activities are also in support with Canada's high level commitments in the Millennium Declaration.