

**PROTECTION OF FORESTS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT**

Dear Minister Isabela Tejerina,

Dear Minister Jahnatek,

Dear distinguished guests and colleagues,

We all know that the forests are factor of vital importance for the survival and development of the human civilization. They are basic element for the maintenance and improvement of the environment to ensure sustainable development and prosperity of the society. During the Forest Europe process we reach higher understanding both on the society and high political level. The documents we are going to sign proof our wish to ensure better future for our children. Another result is that sustainable and multifunctional forest management became a common concept and a contemporary paradigm of the forest policy. But there are still many challenges ahead. Part of our societies accepts the natural assets as free granted. The fast changes in the environment and the economic crises enhance the pressure on the forests. This requires to improve their proactive adaptive management.

In Bulgaria forest protection and development of forestry traditionally have been considered as a priority of the national policy. Forests cover 37% of the country's territory and conserve more than 80% of the protected plants and more than 60% of the protected animal species in the country. About 57% of the forest areas are included in the ecological network "Natura 2000". In the recent years number of national programs and strategic documents to support the sustainable forest management were elaborated and adopted, reflecting both the adverse climatic change and the increased anthropogenic pressure on the forest ecosystems, as a result of the prolonged economic stagnation in the country. In the Program of the government for the period 2014-2018 two priorities regarding the forest sector are included: "Sustainable and multifunctional forest management" and " Legislative measures to prevent illegal activities." In 2013 a National Strategy for the development of the forest sector in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2013 - 2020 was adopted by the Council of Ministers and in 2014 a Strategic Plan for the development of the forest sector for the period 2013-2023 was endorsed by the Minister of Agriculture and Food. In these two documents particular attention is paid to the protection of forests and their adaptation to climate change and concrete actions to achieve these priorities are set. Furthermore, within the international project FUTURE FOREST under INTERREG C IV Programme of the EU a "Programme of measures for adaptation of the Bulgarian forests to the climate change" was developed and approved by the Minister of Agriculture and Food.

A major problem for the implementation of the planned actions for protection of the forests, set in the strategic documents, is the lack of sufficient funding. Therefore, in the Forestry Act,

adopted in 2011, for the first time the need of payment for ecosystem services from the forests was regulated. The Law stipulates the development of an Ordinance defining the compensations for reimbursement of the forest ecosystem services of public benefit, which should define the methods for their valuation. This legislative initiative aims to provide financial support for the forest owners who spend money to maintain and improve the ecosystem functions of their forests. Without such support and in the conditions of constantly deteriorating environment due to the climate change, there is a real risk the ecosystems to lose part of their regulatory and supportive environmental functions. This will cause a chain reaction of loss of biodiversity, reduction of water resources, increased soil erosion and land degradation, worsening the conditions for agriculture, etc.

In Ministerial Resolution 2 it is emphasized the necessity to enhance the international cooperation in the field of forest protection. Indeed, natural disasters do not respect national borders and their control requires collective efforts of all parties concerned. In this regard, in 2015 Bulgaria initiated the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Balkan countries in the sphere of sustainable management and protection of forests and for the establishment of Forum "Balkan forests." The purpose of this Forum is to create effective relations at operational level between the forest departments in the countries from the Balkan region and to ensure a rapid and adequate response to risks of natural disasters or accidents affecting the rural areas in the border regions. Until now, the Memorandum was signed by five countries - Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Forest Europe process has proven its effectiveness for enhancing the international cooperation and coordination in addressing important issues for the forest sector. Taking into consideration the noted in the Ministerial Decision of this forum necessity to re-examine the challenges and opportunities for the future development of Forest Europe, we believe that the protection of forests, their adaptation to the climate change and adequate financial support, through compensation for ecosystem services inclusive, should be underlined as priorities in the future work of this political process.

Thank you for your attention!