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What Will We Use the Forests for in the Future?

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A Task Force was created by IUFRO in 2011 to look at the future use of forest resources. On August 27-29, 2013, the Task Force gathered more than 120 policy makers, researchers, industry leaders and NGOs at the Resources for the Future conference, hosted by the University of British Columbia, Canada, to discuss four major themes: implications of globalization for forests, plantations, bioproducts and advanced building systems and forest ecosystem services. (http://iufro2013.forestry.ubc.ca/)

Eucalyptus mosaic plantations in Brazil
(reproduced with permission from Suzano Pulp and Paper)

Current state

With a governance framework aiming at zero forestry loss and degradation by 2020 in place, increased consumer demands and increasing scarcity of resources, the market for novel or improved traditional bioproducts is growing. Given the world's population growth and urbanization, environmental pressures and climate change, forests and the bioproducts derived from them offer potential solutions for the future global economy. Our future forests will have to be more productive, resilient to disease and pests, and adaptable to climate change. Future demand will likely be met from plantation forests that maintain conservation and biodiversity standards and respect local communities' needs and livelihoods.

Governing the forests

With competing demands for forests, forest lands and products, indigenous communities and other communities living in forests are increasingly recognized by governments as "deciders" of the fate of forests. Failing to recognize local aspirations, land claims, and legal rights will lead to the destruction of local livelihoods, increased conflict and competition for remaining land, accelerated destruction of the world's remaining forest carbon stocks. Maintaining zero forest loss will require forestry and farming practices that produce more with less land, water and pollution, while retaining resilience and adaptability.

A sun-rise industry

The forest sector represents a unique opportunity to meet future needs with a range of land-use options and bio-products, including energy, chemicals and materials. A shift to a wider array of forest services (e.g., recreation, carbon offsets, and water management) is needed. Forest cover and related services could expand through mosaics of new plantations, natural forest restoration and responsible farming. Plantations will be the future production powerhouse, but must maintain ecosystem integrity, protect high conservation values and be developed through effective stakeholder participation.

The emerging green economy will see forest products substituting products derived from fossil fuels, but movement towards the bio-economy has not yet catalyzed the transformative changes required to reinvigorate parts of the forest products sector. To be successful, forest bio-products must be economically viable and respond to customer and market needs. Green growth will be driven by a combination of novel partnerships with inter- and non-governmental organizations, science and technology innovations and skills deployed by the private business. Contrary to popular belief, the sun over the forest sector is rising.

Future activities

A book will be produced from the presentations and the material will form the basis of a sub-plenary session at the 2014 IUFRO World Congress. The recommendations will be incorporated into the 2014/19 IUFRO Strategy.

IUFRO Task Force on Resources for the Future: http://www.iufro.org/science/task-forces/resources-for-future/