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International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITAA)

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*Presented at the Ministerial Conference  
on the Protection of Forests in Europe  
16-17 June 1993  
Helsinki*

### **U.S. Remarks**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The United States appreciates the opportunity to be an observer during the deliberations of participating States on how to advance forest conservation in Europe. In our view, this conference is particularly significant because of its timing just one year after the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), because it is focusing on issues of temperate and boreal forests, and because it is a regional forum for countries with a common interest and shared goal to forest conservation.

I would like to offer the U.S. perspective on international forest matters, which we believe have a bearing on these deliberations. I would also like to mention some of the recent domestic actions of the U.S. Government, which seem relevant to this discussion.

Mr. Chairman, the United States believes that the conservation and sustainable management of forests is one of our most pressing global needs.

The importance of wise forest use worldwide was a centerpiece of UNCED. The Statement of Forest Principles adopted in Rio, although nonbinding, represents the first global consensus ever negotiated on forests. It also reflects the degree to which there is a global consensus on forests at this time.

Therefore, in the U.S. view, the Forest Principles are an important step forward in international forest conservation. We believe that the context for international forest discussions -- whether global, regional or bilateral -- should be the UNCED Forest Principles and Chapter 11 of Agenda 21. The U.S. will focus its forest conservation efforts and initiatives on implementing these documents. We hope to learn here how European countries, individually and as a group, will approach the implementation of these documents with respect to their forests.

Secondly, I think it is obvious to all of us that increasing international attention is being focused on temperate and boreal forest issues in the post-UNCED era. All countries that are major holders of temperate and boreal forests are being challenged to seriously examine how they can promote the conservation and sustainable use of their own forests. This is particularly significant for the United States, which not only has vast forest areas, but is also the largest importer and second largest exporter of wood products in the world.

As many of you know, the Year 2000 is the goal agreed by members of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) for putting internationally traded tropical timber on a sustainable basis. While this goal focuses on tropical timber producing countries, we believe that all countries should adopt the goal of sustainable forest management.

The United States is committed to the national goal of achieving sustainable management of U.S. forests by the year 2000. We would like to see the countries present here, both participants and observers, join us in committing to this goal for their own forests.

While we make this commitment as an individual nation, and hope other forested countries do likewise, the U.S. is also interested in exploring regional approaches to conservation and sustainable use of temperate and boreal forests. We understand that participants present here may consider the possibility of a regional agreement on forest conservation for Europe. We would encourage such an initiative, which could provide a constructive model for other regions of the world.

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A third and final point from the U.S. perspective, Mr. Chairman, concerns the proposal for the U.N. Secretary-General to appoint an independent World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development. In our view, the work of such a commission could advance the concept of and commitments to the conservation and sustainable use of all types of forests. It could also provide a useful, post-UNCED and less politically charged look at the Forest Principles, and thereby set the stage for the review of Chapter 11 of Agenda 21 by the new Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). We intend to support the creation of such a commission during the current CSD meeting in New York should the proposal be raised.

Mr. Chairman, I would now like to turn to some of the policies and activities of the U.S. Government and in particular the U.S. Forest Service, which demonstrate our national commitment to implementation of Agenda 21 and our concern for issues addressed by the Strasbourg Resolution.

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The United States has a rich history and firm foundation of laws, programs and policies to protect and conserve our nation's forests, beginning in the late 19th century. There are significant achievements from our past efforts; for example:

- Following two centuries of decline, the area of forest land in the United States has stabilized and has remained essentially unchanged since 1920;
- The average volume of standing timber per acre in U.S. forests is 30% greater today than in the previous 40 years, although annual harvests have increased; and
- Tens of millions of acres of cut over lands that existed in 1900 have long since been reforested. Many of these areas today are mature forests.

As notable as these achievements are, we have learned that these accomplishments are not enough. To fully embrace the Forest Principles adopted in Rio, and to implement Agenda 21, we must move forward as a nation from sustained yield forestry to sustainable forest management.

This advance in land management is focusing our attention, as a people, on alternatives that attain the greatest economic and social contribution while meeting the requirements of applicable laws and regulations that protect and conserve our natural resources.

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This issue is boldly framed by the public debate in the Pacific Northwest of the United States to define what constitutes sustainability in the old growth ecosystems. It is significant that we are using a variety of democratic processes in the course of this debate, and that a mandate for decisive action has been set forth under the leadership of our President and Vice-President. At an April 2 Forest Conference wherein all interests were gathered, The President posed this fundamental question related to harmonizing human, biological and economic imperatives:

"How can we achieve a balanced and comprehensive policy that recognizes the importance of forests and timber to the economy and jobs of this region, and how can we preserve our precious old-growth forests, which are part of our national heritage and that, once destroyed, can never be replaced?"

This Forest Conference initiated an aggressive assessment, with ensuing announcements to be released this summer.

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This situation is an example of a larger commitment by U.S. forest land management agencies towards implementation of Agenda 21. As announced in June 1992, all U.S. federal forests are to be managed using an ecological approach. This policy will continue to uphold multiple-use, but with an emphasis on blending the needs of people and environmental values -- with the result that our national forests and associated ecosystems will be diverse, healthy, productive, and sustainable.

In addition to the guiding principle of using an ecological approach, we will use the best scientific knowledge in making decisions and select the most appropriate technologies for management. An important component of this approach will be to end the use of "clearcutting" as a standard, commercial timber harvest practice on U.S. federal lands, except when necessary to meet critical wildlife habitat need, or other critical ecological needs, such as restoration of native forests.

Within the year, the U.S. Forest Service has developed Regional implementation strategies and established demonstration projects, which feature research and technical applications. An ecological classification system across the U.S. is also underway for National Forest lands.

U.S. natural resource agencies are demonstrating commitment to global sustainable forestry through internal policies and international activities. Beginning in 1990, by act of the United States Congress, the USDA Forest Service established a new division for international forestry. This organizational change supports an expanded U.S. mission to assist with such global concerns as climate change, tropical deforestation, natural hazard reduction, biodiversity, and sustainable development of natural resources.

In this expanded international mission, U.S. activities build upon historic partnerships with a number of organizations gathered here today. Our collaborative efforts to advance scientific knowledge and technical application in Europe ranges from participation in multilateral efforts - such as global resource assessment activities and the International Union of Forestry Research Organizations - to bilateral studies on a wide array of subjects. For example, in our national effort to assess the impacts of acidic precipitation on natural resources and human health, U.S. scientists gain from science and technical exchange with European colleagues, and from consultation with the UN/ECE International Cooperative Programme on Assessment and Monitoring of Air Pollution Effects on Forests. For studies specific to boreal forests, U.S. scientists are benefiting from a recent collaborative vehicle, the International Boreal Forest Research Association. This Association, which has participants from Canada, Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States, uses a working group system to accomplish study and communication in three areas: 1) classification, monitoring and inventory; 2) ecosystem function and global change; and 3) forest management and biodiversity.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would repeat the appreciation of the United States at being invited as an observer to your conference. Efforts to understand and mitigate global change; to sustainably manage forests; protect biodiversity, including conservation of forest genetic resources; and to protect forests are among the priority emphases for the USDA Forest Service, and will continue to be areas for U.S. science and technical collaboration in Europe. The conservation of temperate and boreal forests, including our own, is particularly important to the U.S., and, as I have mentioned, we are committed to the national goal of sustainable forest management by the year 2000. Thank you for this opportunity to increase our understanding of Europe's actions to sustain forests. Sustaining our regional and global natural resources – through action at home and partnership abroad – is our common, vital concern.