

Ladies and gentlemen,

Climate change is a particularly important question for the Mediterranean region. The climate of the Mediterranean region is characterized by heavy rainfall in winter and hot and dry summers, and any change in this distribution pattern will impact not only the vegetation that has adapted to this climate with a high endemic biodiversity as a result, but also our ways of life and our livelihoods, with direct consequences for the Mediterranean agriculture, for access to water, or for tourism, among others. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published in 2013 has identified the Mediterranean as one of the regions most vulnerable to the impacts of global warming and scientific projections define the Mediterranean as a major “hotspot” of climate change.

Mediterranean forests can and must play a role in addressing climate change. Mediterranean forests are a natural capital that is slightly increasing at the regional level, with forest areas in the Mediterranean countries that have grown from 74 million hectares in 1990 to 88 million hectares in 2015 according to the latest Global Forest Resources Assessment of FAO. At the same time, this natural capital is fragile and can be easily degraded by drivers of forest degradation such as overgrazing, land abandonment, or wildfires, whose negative effects are exacerbated by climate change and population growth. In the Mediterranean region, ensuring that forests will play their role in tackling climate change requires a reevaluation of the goods and services that forest ecosystems provide. Forest products such as wood, biomass or non-wood forest products such as pine nuts, cork, mushrooms, aromatic and medicinal plants, directly contribute to the populations’ livelihoods. Their economic reevaluation would require a better structuring of the corresponding sectors and more fairness in the distribution of the value along the value chains. But Mediterranean forests also provide valuable ecosystem services that contribute to water quality and availability, limitation of soil erosion, or carbon storage. The value of these services is often simply disregarded. Reevaluating these services will require a change in the way we envision economic services, to move towards a green economy.

Make the best of the forest sector to address climate change is a challenging task that will require to address the drivers of forest degradation under climate change while promoting the goods and services provided by forest ecosystems. Forest and landscape restoration is one of the forest-based solutions that is highly relevant to address this challenge in the Mediterranean region. Forest and landscape restoration not only aims at regaining ecological functions by rehabilitating degraded forests, but also aims at enhancing human well-being across deforested or degraded forest landscapes. Forest and landscape restoration is a holistic approach that involves trade-offs between agricultural and forestry production and environmental conservation, to ensure the best possible integration at the landscape level. It relies on participatory approaches to include all stakeholders in the decisions and implementations of actions.

FAO has been supporting the implementation of forest and landscape restoration through its FLR Mechanism. Lebanon is actually one of the pioneering Mediterranean countries where pilot activities on forest and landscape restoration have been implemented with the support of FAO. FAO has been collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture of Lebanon to support reforestation across Lebanon, empower local communities to protect their forests, reinforce the sustainable use of goods and services and replicate successful models across Lebanon. The Smart Adaptation of Forest Landscapes in Mountain Areas (SALMA) project that started in 2016 is also closely connected to this effort on forest restoration. SALMA’s objective is to enhance the resilience of vulnerable rural communities and their livelihoods in mountain areas through sustainable forest management. The project will assist consortiums of municipalities and reforestation partners to develop and implement participatory reforestation plans to increase the adaptive capacity of fragile forest ecosystems, increase the forest cover in the targeted areas and counteract biodiversity loss and soil erosion.

Forest-based actions that have been implemented in Lebanon to address climate change can certainly be replicated and scaled-up at the regional level. The Sixth Mediterranean Forest Week will be important to identify and reinforce options like forest and landscape restoration that can be used to meet the Nationally Determined Contributions of Mediterranean countries. We wish fruitful discussions on these questions during this week between all stakeholders of the forest sector in the Mediterranean region.

May I end by thanking the Lebanese government, in the person of H.E. Dr. Hassan Lakiss, the Minister of Agriculture, for hosting this event and all the sponsors for making it possible for such a big number of experts to participate in this week.

Also, I extend my thanks to the organizers, mainly the FAO’s secretariat as well as the team of the Ministry of agriculture, for their dedication and efforts beyond the possible and in particular:

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Ms. Patricia Sfeir, Leader of the Mediterranean and Near East Forest Communicators Network;
and Mr. Nicolas Picard, FAO Forestry Department.