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CONFERENCE

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International Year of Soils and World Soil Day

Executive Summary

This progress report highlights the processes put in place to celebrate the International Year of Soils (IYS) 2015 and presents the outcomes of the celebration of the World Soil Day (WSD) on 5 December 2014. The main objective of the IYS is to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fibre production, and their essential ecosystem functions for present and future generations. In particular, the year aims to advocate against the progressive degradation of soils, due to inappropriate practices, growing population pressure and inadequate governance of this essential natural resource. Maintaining healthy soils is a priority for feeding the growing population.

The attention of the Conference is drawn to the importance of soils management continuing beyond the year 2015.

Suggested action by the Conference

The Conference may wish to:

- acknowledge and welcome the progress report on the International Year of Soils (IYS) 2015;
- encourage FAO Member Nations to engage in the celebration of the International Year of Soils and enhance their support and cooperation towards its goals;
- support, beyond 2015, the debate on soil management as an essential element to achieve food security and nutrition;
- take note of the soils related indicators included in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

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I. Background

1. The 68th United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 68/232, on 20 December 2013, declared 2015 to be the International Year of Soils (IYS) and designated 5 December as the World Soil Day in recognition of the economic and social significance of good land management, including soils, particularly its contribution to economic growth, biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and food security and nutrition, eradicating poverty, women's empowerment, addressing climate change and improving water availability.
2. The resolution, proposed by the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand, had been previously endorsed by FAO Members during the 145th Session of the FAO Council and the 38th Session of the FAO Conference.
3. FAO was invited to facilitate the celebration of the World Soil Day and, in collaboration with governments and various partners, undertake the Secretariat of the IYS.
4. The main objective of the IYS is to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fibre production, essential ecosystem functions and better adaptation to climate change for present and future generations. Five specific objectives were identified for the IYS:
 - i) raise full awareness of all stakeholders about the fundamental roles of soils for human life;
 - ii) promote full recognition of the crucial role of soils to food security and nutrition, climate change adaptation and mitigation, essential ecosystem services, poverty alleviation and sustainable development;
 - iii) support effective policies and actions for the sustainable management and protection of soil resources;
 - iv) promote investment in sustainable soil management activities, to ensure healthy soils for different land users and population groups;
 - v) strengthen initiatives in connection with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) process and Post-2015 agenda.
5. The advocacy activities organized within the 2015 International Year of Soils provide the opportunity to place soils management at the centre of the policy debate.
6. The work on soils gained momentum in 2013 following the creation of the Global Soils Partnership (GSP), approved by the 145th session of FAO Council.
7. The GSP centres its work on the importance of soils for food security and nutrition, climate change adaptation, provision of ecosystem services and sustainable development.
8. While both the IYS and the GSP are facilitated and managed by FAO, they involve other key stakeholders worldwide, thus allowing for a coordinated approach that yields complementarity between the technical and research work organized under the Global Soil Partnership and the advocacy work within the year.
9. The importance of soils were highlighted through the soil-related goals and targets already included in the Post-2015 SDGs. There are specifically four SDGs which goals (2, 3, 12 and 15) are closely related to the importance of sustainable soil management and conservation. Their targets include various key aspects such as improving soil quality, reducing number of deaths and illnesses caused by soil pollution, combating desertification and restoring degraded land and soil.

II. Progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action (PoA) for the International Year of Soils

10. Following the UNGA declaration, a first draft of the IYS Plan of Action was developed and shared with the Global Soil Partnership Assembly which endorsed it at its second session (22-24 July 2014). This draft Plan of Action was conceived as a living document that would be enriched during the

IYS implementation. The theme "Healthy soils for a healthy life", as well as the visual identity of the year, were accepted by the Global Soil Partnership starting the year's activities.

11. FAO with Member Nations and Rome-based Agencies, established the International Year of Soils Steering Committee (IYS-SC) responsible for overseeing the activities during the year. The IYS-SC is chaired by the Kingdom of Thailand and composed by: Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, European Union, Germany, Russian Federation, United States of America, civil society and farmers organizations, private sector, academia and other UN organizations.

12. FAO's work as Secretariat of the IYS, involved three different units: the Office of Partnerships, Advocacy and Capacity Development (OPC) for coordination; the Land and Water Division (NRL) for technical inputs; and the Office of Corporate Communications (OCC) for the communication aspects.

13. The IYS-SC is coordinating the key activities undertaken within the Plan of Action, including:

- a) The launching of the IYS on 5 December 2014 in New York, which was mirrored by events organized in Rome, Bangkok and Santiago de Chile.
- b) The implementation of a communication plan, crafting of IYS communications materials and creation of a dedicated website (<http://www.fao.org/soils-2015/en/>) to disseminate the different activities programmed for the IYS by the Secretariat and other partners globally.
- c) The design of an IYS calendar of events to assist in coordinating IYS events in different countries.
- d) The implementation of Regional Soil Partnership workshops in all regions to develop regional plans on sustainable soil management for the next five years.

14. The Plan of Action activities are being funded through the Healthy Soils Facility, and thanks to the generous contributions from the Kingdom of Thailand (100,000 USD); Switzerland (100,000 USD); and the International Fertilizers Association (58,000 USD).

III. Progress on the Celebration of World Soil Day

15. The first official UN World Soil Day was successfully celebrated on 5 December 2014 in more than 80 countries and was also the opportunity to launch the International Year of Soils. The 2014 theme was: "Soils, a foundation for family farming", thus linking the International Year of Family Farming with the IYS.

16. The 2015 World Soil Day theme is: "Soils, a solid ground for life". To support the 2015 World Soil Day, the IYS Secretariat is working to elaborate campaign material for a variety of audiences.

17. Future World Soil Days will be coordinated by the Global Soil Partnership.

IV. Challenges

18. The challenges identified within the IYS are the following:

- a) **Funding:** the IYS as any international year relies on non-regular programme funds for its activities. While the IYS steering committee takes this opportunity to publicly thank the generous contributions of the Kingdom of Thailand, Switzerland and the International Fertilizer Association, it calls the attention of members to the need to mobilize additional resources that would allow the implementation of the planned activities.
- b) **Continuity of activities on sustainable soil management:** While the IYS raises the awareness among different stakeholders, it is important that the understanding of the centrality of soil for food security and nutrition is kept beyond 2015. In this regard policy makers and practitioners are called upon to introduce in the policy debate, the concepts behind "Soil, as a solid ground for life". The Global Soil Partnership provides a valuable vehicle for channelling future efforts in soil management and maintaining the momentum of the IYS.