



COMMITTEE ON FORESTRY

TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION

5 - 9 October 2020

FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ELABORATING AN ASSESSMENT OF GLOBAL FOREST RESOURCES, COMPARING THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF A TWO YEAR AND FIVE YEAR CYCLE

I. BACKGROUND

1. To respond to the demand on more frequent reporting, the 164th Session of the FAO Council requested FAO to prepare an information note for the forthcoming session of the Committee on Forestry (COFO) on the financial and technical implications of “elaborating an assessment of global forest resources comparing the positive and negative aspects of a two-year and five-year cycle”¹.
2. Since 2000, the Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) has been carried out in five-year cycles, providing a comprehensive reporting on the world forest resources and a basis for further analyses and outlooks by FAO and other users. Each cycle has included a full review of scope and content of the assessment, including an expert consultation.
3. Since FRA 2005, the reporting process has included a global workshop at launch, regional workshops, an in-depth peer review and quality control of submitted country reports, formal validation of final country reports, data analysis, report writing, layout, translations and dissemination. In the latest assessment (FRA 2020), the dissemination products included a publication and a digital report with key findings, a comprehensive main report, 236 country reports and an open access digital platform that allows the visualization and download of reported data as well as global, regional and country summary fact sheets in a user-friendly and non-proprietary format.

¹ The Council “requested FAO to prepare technical notes on the financial, and technical implications of elaborating an assessment of global forest resources comparing the positive and negative aspects of a two year and five year cycle, for the forthcoming session of the COFO” (CL 164/REP, paragraph 18 (q)).

4. To reduce the reporting burden of the countries and avoid that several organizations independently request them the same information, FAO and five other partner organizations established the “Collaborative Forest Resources Questionnaire” (CFRQ)². The CFRQ has been successfully implemented since FRA 2015.
5. Since 2016, FRA is annually reporting data for the SDG indicators 15.1.1 and 15.2.1. The SDG reporting requests annual data at country level and 5-year periodic data at aggregated levels. FRA therefore adjusted the reporting for FRA 2020 to include annual data on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-related variables from 2015 and onwards.
6. More and more countries are embarking on continuous or periodic forest monitoring. Therefore, new and better data on forest resources are expected to be available more frequently. When preparing for FRA 2020, it was suggested that FRA should start looking into the possibility of more frequent reporting after FRA 2020. The on-line platform developed for FRA 2020 was designed to facilitate such a change.

II. Issues to consider for defining the future FRA reporting process

7. The need for timely and accurate information about the world’s forest resources is increasing. Monitoring and reporting needs for international processes (SDGs, UN conventions, etc.), as well as thematic analysis and forest sector outlook studies require updated data at different points in time, and some information, such as data for the SDG indicators, is requested annually. FRA, being the main global process that collects official country data on forest resources, must therefore adapt to provide updated information at more frequent intervals.
8. FRA is the process that collects the core information used by all CFRQ partners. Changes in the FRA scope and reporting cycle will therefore have a direct impact on the CFRQ partner organizations.
9. The reporting burden on countries is already high and countries in previous COFO sessions as well as members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests ranging from the Rio Convention secretariats to other UN and international agencies have stressed that it should not be increased.
10. Currently, FRA data are collected through a network of officially nominated National Correspondents (NC), which is fundamental for the success of the FRA process. Global and regional workshops have been important opportunities for the NCs to dedicate time and effort to the FRA reporting. Future FRA reporting must continue to keep the NCs motivated and involved in the process.

III. Options for future FRA reporting

11. This chapter presents main options for future FRA reporting, including those requested by the Council, with an additional option for consideration by COFO. Based on COFO’s strategic guidance on the way forward, FRA will be subject to more detailed discussions, both internally and with the CFRQ partners and the FRA Advisory Group in order to develop a concrete proposal (or proposals) to bring forward to the next FRA Expert Consultation in 2021.

² The Collaborative Forest Resources Questionnaire partners are: FAO, the International Tropical Timber Organization, FOREST EUROPE, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Observatory of Central African Forests and the Montréal Process.

1. Continue with the five-year FRA reporting

- i. This option foresees continuation of the well-established process that has been consolidated and refined over the last decades with periodic revisions of scope and content. The next FRA report would be published in 2025 with a scope, data collection, review, validation and reporting process similar to FRA 2020.

Advantages

Countries find the reporting burden acceptable and, due to the new FRA reporting platform introduced for FRA 2020, this burden will likely further reduce for next FRA. Also, the total cost of implementation is expected to decrease slightly, as the digital reporting tools will continue to increase the reporting efficiency through facilitated data entry, review, quality control and analysis.

Challenges

The option does not meet the increasing needs for more frequent and timely reporting to support international processes, in particular the SDG reporting, which requests annual data for several of the key FRA variables.

2. Move to a two-year FRA reporting cycle

- i. This option entails a reduction of the reporting cycle from five to two years and publication of a full FRA report every two years with a scope similar to FRA 2020.

Advantages

Apart from having more frequent data available for a variety of information products and processes, another main advantage of this option would be to have FRA fully synchronized with the *State of the World's Forests* (SOFO), using the SOFO publication as the main vehicle to present updated FRA data.

Challenges

Implementing full FRA reporting with a two-year cycle would require significant additional resources both at FAO and in the countries. Even with additional resources, the implementation of the data collection, review, quality control, country validation and reporting every two years would require significant narrowing of the scope of FRA.

3. Full reporting every five years and possibility for annual updates.

- i. This option builds on the five-year full reporting as in option 1. In addition, each year, countries would be provided with an opportunity to update their reports if they have new data available. The voluntary updates could be partial and cover only a subset of variables, but they would have to maintain the within-report consistency. For example, if the update includes new forest area figures, all related variables, including growing stock, above ground biomass and carbon stock would need to be updated as well. Updated reports will have to undergo a full review/quality control and formal country validation.
- ii. The full reporting would be carried out every five years as currently with a scope similar to FRA 2020. However, the content of the FRA report and the timing of its release would need to be further discussed and evaluated with relevant stakeholders and processes considering

the potential advantages of synchronizing publications with the SOFO report, as well as the requirements for SDG reporting.

Advantages

The possibility for annual updates would result in better quality and timeliness of the FRA database. Updated information products based on the most recent data available could be extracted at any time for any regional or international reporting process including SDG reporting, SOFO, CBD, UNFCCC and the UN Strategic plan for Forests and its Global Forest Goals. Access to updated data on forest resources would also support global and regional thematic analyses and outlook studies.

Releases of FRA and SOFO could be synchronized (and possibly integrated), reducing their total production cost. Annual FRA information products could be synchronized with annual SDG reporting, ensuring full consistency between FRA and SDG databases at all times. FRA's position as a supplier of timely information on forest resources would be strengthened.

Challenges

As the countries would have the possibility to report more frequently, the database reporting tools would need to be further developed to keep track of changes and their timing. Additional resources would be required to support the countries to fill their reports as well as to review quality control and validate them. An annual country validation process would need to be put in place.

To minimize the increase in the workload, reporting tools could be improved.

IV. Financial implications and technical aspects

12. The initial total budget of FRA 2020 for 2016-2020 was USD 8.7 million. About USD 5.3 million of the budget was planned to be covered by the regular programme and the rest by a voluntary contribution from the European Union. During the implementation, the programme was strengthened by additional components, including intensive capacity development on country reporting and FRA Remote Sensing Survey as well as digital FRA Dissemination platform development. These were financed by additional voluntary contributions from the European Union, Norway, Global Environment Facility and Finland. With these adjustments, the total annual FRA budget for the period 2016-2021 is estimated at USD 2.7 million.

13. Moving towards and committing to a more frequent and digital reporting process will require continuous development and maintenance of the FRA reporting and dissemination platform as well as continued and intensive capacity development on country reporting as well as remote sensing. Hence, it will require the same or higher level of annual budget the FRA currently has and, depending on the chosen reporting modality and content, an additional 1-2 regular programme funded positions at P3/P4 levels to guarantee sufficient long-term institutional support for the process. The budget impact of such a change would be roughly USD 175,000 / position / year.

14. Drawing on information of the current cost of the FRA production, it can be concluded that maintaining current five-year full reporting cycle would likely be the most economical one, while the full reporting every second year would be the most resource demanding option.

15. The current five-year FRA cycle has allowed for a comprehensive reporting process including review of scope, design of reporting format and tools, training of National Correspondents, support and advice to countries during the reporting, review and quality control, official validation

of data by countries, analysis, and dissemination. Experience shows that data collection and quality control alone take at least one full year of constant interaction with the countries.

16. Therefore, performing a full FRA reporting exercise every two years is not technically feasible, unless the scope of the FRA reporting is significantly reduced. However, FAO estimates that annual updating of and reporting on selected key parameters could be implemented with moderate increase in the budget covering one additional professional post.

V. Conclusions

17. FRA needs to adapt and respond to the increasing needs for a more frequent reporting on the world's forest resources. The new FRA reporting platform was developed to facilitate this transition.

18. Adjustment of the FRA reporting cycle and process is a major change. It is expected that the 25th Session of COFO will provide the strategic guidance on the way forward, and based on this guidance, further discussions will be held with the FRA advisory group and CFRQ partners and brought to consideration for the FRA Expert Consultation planned for 2021. Based on recommendations from this consultation, a consolidated and detailed proposal for the future FRA reporting can be brought forward to COFO 2022, for consideration.

19. Considering the issues presented above, a periodic full FRA reporting with the possibility for annual updates for countries with new data, seems to be the most viable way forward. However, implementing such a change would require additional regular programme investments on FRA staffing as well as a long-term commitment of the resource partners to continue to support the process with voluntary contributions.