

2 February 2011

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss,
President of the 65th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Global Launch of the International Year of Forests**

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

It is my great pleasure to chair this meaningful event launching the International Year of Forests, 2011. I welcome you all.

Forests play an important role in sustaining people's livelihoods, traditions and cultures. They provide shelter, food, energy and other essential ecosystem services. Hundred of millions of people, mostly in developing countries, depend on forests for their daily subsistence. Forests inspire and give people a place to rest and breathe - literally, since forests function as the "lungs of our planet".

Yet, in spite of this vital role, each minute that we spend on this planet breathing in and breathing out, about 25 hectares of forest are lost, mainly due to conversion to other uses.

Such excessive utilization and mismanagement of forests seriously undermine our fight against poverty, against climate change and natural disasters. Ultimately, as history reminds us, in the past, entire civilizations collapsed due to deforestation.

In 2006, the UN General Assembly emphasized the need for sustainable management of forests and declared 2011 the International Year of Forests. The aim of the International Year is to raise awareness for sustainable management, conservation and development of all types of forests "for the benefit of current and future generations". This is a significant contribution to sustainable development and poverty reduction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have to eradicate poverty, but not the forests!

It is very meaningful that the International Year of Forests follows on the heels of the International Year of Biodiversity, 2010, which successfully concluded with the adoption of a new biodiversity strategic plan in Nagoya. This plan contains targets on significantly reducing, by 2020, the rate of loss of all natural habitats, including forests, and sustainably managing forestry to ensure biodiversity conservation.

In September this year, the General Assembly will be convening a High-level meeting on “Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”. These challenges are affected by deforestation and climate change and require coordinated policies and actions.

It is my hope that this Year of Forests will raise high political awareness and galvanize activities from the grassroots up so that the interlinked challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change and desertification can be effectively tackled for the benefit of sustainable development. This will help pave the way for a successful UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio in 2012.

Today’s official launch of the International Year of Forests, which celebrates the theme “Forests for People”, marks the beginning of numerous events to highlight the challenges facing many of the world’s forests. It also brings together success stories and valuable lessons on how people promote sustainable forest management. There is indeed much to learn from each others’ experiences.

For this high-level segment, we are joined by several distinguished policymakers, civil society leaders and academics. I pay tribute to their tireless campaigning in favour of forests and sustainable forest management. I extend my sincerest congratulations to Professor Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, for her seminal contribution to advancing the cause of forests. We will also screen short film clips that tell a unique story about the values of forests.

I am honoured to chair such an important launch event, and expect that in 2011 and beyond, every country and each citizen of our planet will take action in favour of forests and bring this message across that: we are all dependent on forests as much as forests are dependent on us.