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UNECE / FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management

Organized by

The UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section and the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC), Germany, supported by the German Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection, and the Secretariat of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the Council of Europe through its Euro-Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

Venue and Date:

United Nations, Geneva, Palais des Nations, 28-29 November 2013

Outline and Agenda

Executive Summary

The UNECE region has recently experienced a number of unprecedented large and disastrous wildfire episodes as accumulated consequence of socio-economic, land-use and climate changes. Some recent wildfire episodes also revealed an increasing vulnerability of society to direct and secondary effects of fire; e.g. the impacts of fire smoke pollution on human health and security. While there have been advances in fire management in some countries, there are still barriers preventing the sharing of scientific and technical knowledge and good practice between wildfire agencies in different States. These barriers have resulted in some wildfire agencies being unintentionally excluded from the technical information and advancements that they could utilize to develop greater national resilience and preparedness for large wildfire incidents. It is often the lack of resilience of a State to manage its own wildfire situation that results in the need for unplanned international emergency assistance.

Given the cross-boundary consequences of wildfires, e.g. transboundary transport of wildfire smoke pollutants, border-crossing wildfires and the wildfire threats to common global assets such as biodiversity, terrestrial carbon pools, atmosphere and climate on the one side, and the willingness of nations side to share expertise and resources in fire management on the other, UNECE member states could develop voluntary principles and procedures on cross-border cooperation and thus enhance economics, inter-operability and effectiveness in fire management between nations and regions.

In order to allow a coordinated, systematic approach for international cooperation in fire management, the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) through its coordinated international groups prepared the convention of the "UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management". While the scope of the Forum will focused on the Eurasian part of the region, the participation of member states of North America (Canada, U.S.A.) in the preparatory work and by attending the Forum ensure the consideration of expertise from countries that are comparatively advanced in fire management capacity and in the development of cross-border agreements and bilateral protocols and coordinated international operating procedures in fire management.

The main aim of the Forum is to elaborate recommendations to UNECE member states to build resilience of nations and communities within the UNECE region to wildfire emergencies and disasters by enhancing national and collective regional fire management capability through international cooperation.

Background and Rationale

The UNECE region extends from Western North America to Far East Asia, covering all longitudes of the northern hemispheric land mass. While the region consists of a large variety of ecosystems and land-use systems, there are commonalities of wildland fire determinants between those countries and subregions that share similar historic and contemporary natural, cultural and social conditions.

In the Eurasian part of the UNECE region, to which the following is mainly referred, some hazards and risks associated with wildland fires have been perceived as threats only recently after the region experienced a number of large and disastrous wildfire episodes and due to a better scientific understanding of conditions influencing wildland fire. The public perception of wildland fire all over the region has been stirred significantly by the discussion of the anticipated consequences of climate change on wildfire occurrence and impacts. Some recent wildfire episodes also revealed an increasing vulnerability of society to direct and secondary effects of fire; e.g. the impacts of fire smoke pollution on human health and security.

Wildfires burning at the interface or even within residential, urban and industrial areas, and fires burning in terrain contaminated by radioactivity, industrial deposits and remnants of armed conflicts are perceived as new, unprecedented threats – although they have been around for some time, albeit unnoticed publicly and politically. For instance, it is becoming evident that the change of fire regimes in the cultural landscapes of Eurasia is driven by land-use change. In North America the fire seasons between 2011 and 2013 revealed the increasing vulnerability of human populations and economic assets to wildland fires both in forested and non-forested environments.

In temperate-boreal Eurasia several extended wildfire episodes have resulted in severe environmental damages, high economic losses and considerable humanitarian problems. After the fire crisis in the Mediterranean region in 2007, followed by the severe fire and smoke episode in Western Russia in 2010 and again in the Mediterranean region in 2012, several key issues affecting wildland fire in the cultural landscapes of temperate-boreal Eurasia have been identified, e.g.:

- Increasing rural exodus and urbanization, resulting in abandonment of traditional land cultivation (agriculture, pastoralism, forestry) and thus an increasing wildfire hazard;
- Urbanization resulting in a reduced rural work force, including availability of rural firefighters;
- Limited fire management capabilities in some countries due to the historic division of mandates of public services and land owners; lack of regulations and responsibilities on agricultural lands and at the interface between wildlands and residential areas;
- Re-privatization of formerly nationalized forests resulting in vacuums of forest and fire management in smallholder forest estates;
- Weakened capacity over forestry and decreased fire management capabilities in many Eastern European and Central Asian countries as a consequence of the transition of national economies, often associated with the uncontrolled or illegal forest use and increase of related wildfires;
- Increasing occurrence of wildfires affecting the perimeters of metropolitan areas, settlements and developments dispersed throughout rural landscapes;
- Secondary problems associated with wildfires, e.g., those burning on territories contaminated by radioactivity and remnants from armed conflicts (e.g., unexploded ordnance, land mines, uranium-depleted ammunition); or wildfires affecting agricultural lands treated with pesticides; landfills, other industrial waste and structures containing hazardous materials, especially at the urban / residential perimeters;
- Consequences of climate change on cultural fire regimes and ecosystem vulnerability (e.g., climate-driven transformation of former fire-free or fire-protected natural ecosystems and land-use systems such as peat bogs and high-altitude mountain ecosystems to ecosystems becoming vulnerable to and increasingly affected by wildfires).

During the last two decades UNECE member states have shown an increasing interest in addressing wildfires and fire management in the region and have progressed in wildland fire science and the development of innovative scopes and methods in fire management, e.g.:

- Wider application of prescribed fire in nature conservation, forestry and landscape management, with encouraging progress of countries cooperating under the “Eurasian Fire in Nature Conservation Network” and similar initiatives;
- Exploitation of the results of successful international fire research projects to develop adequate public policies affecting fire management and operational fire management, e.g. the latest accomplished multi-national “Fire Paradox” and the Alpine Forest Fire Warning System (ALPFFIRS) projects;
- Introduction and further development of competency-based fire management training standards offering qualifications to fire fighters, foresters and land managers, e.g. the “EuroFire Competency Standards” (funded by EU *Leonardo da Vinci*, implemented by GFMC and available in seven languages by September 2013; with three more languages to be added by November 2013);¹
- New approaches in integrated vegetation management with regards to renewable energy concepts and carbon storage. Some of these initiatives fall within the context of the UNFCCC endeavor to reduce deforestation and forest degradation by identifying opportunities to incorporate wildfire hazard reduction and fire management.

With regards to international exchange and cooperation in fire management advances have been made through formal and informal arrangements, e.g.:

- Building and strengthening of dedicated networks of wildland fire specialists, agencies and other civil society representatives that are covering the UNECE region, e.g.
 - the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire;
 - six of the 14 Regional Wildland Fire Networks of the Global Wildland Fire Network covering the UNECE region (the North American and the Eurasian part of the region);
 - the cooperation mechanism of the European Commission (Civil Protection Mechanism; European Forest Fires Information System);
- Application and further strengthening of existing as well as development of new bilateral agreements on reciprocal cross-boundary assistance in wildfire emergencies across the UNECE region;
- Endeavor to enhance governance of UNECE member states in order to provide and receive assistance in wildfire (and other environmental) emergency situations by setting up standards, protocols and agreements, e.g. procedures evolving under the lead of the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit and the UN Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies, e.g., the newly created Environmental Emergencies Center (EEC);
- Recommendations of regional groups, projects, programmes and earlier regional conferences aimed at enhancing international cooperation in fire management in the Eurasian part of the UNECE region. Examples of such recommendations include
 - The proposed development of a “Regional Strategy for Cooperation in Fire Management in Southeast Europe” (2006);²
 - The outcomes of expert meetings such as the recommendations of the workshop “Assessment of Forest Fire Risks and Innovative Strategies for Fire Prevention” – an activity of the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) (2010);
 - The “Study on Wildfire Fighting Resources Sharing Models” by the European Commission;³
 - Recommendations from projects supported by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative addressing wildland fire, human security and peace in the EECCA region;

¹ <http://www.euro-fire.eu/>

² <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/SEEurope/Strategy-WFM-RSEEFN-2-02-05-2006.pdf>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/echo/civil_protection/civil/prote/perspectives_en.htm

- Outcomes of the International Conference on Cross-Boundary Fire Management (Irkutsk, Russia, 2010)⁴ and the APEC Conference on Forest Fire Management and International Cooperation in Fire Emergencies of the Asia Pacific (Khabarovsk, Russia, 2010);⁵ and
- The current development of a proposal for the establishment of a European Forest Risk Facility at the European Forest Institute, with wildfire defined as one of five risks to be addressed.

A large number of countries of the UNECE region are members of the Council of Europe, member states of the European Union and signatory states of the MCPFE, and are all concerned about the impact of climate change on forests and forest destruction by fire. In general there is also a collective demand for robust forest policies. In June 2011 the MCPFE adopted a ministerial mandate for negotiating a Legally Binding Agreement on Forests in Europe.

In the endeavor to enhance the protection of forests in Europe it should be noted that wildland fires are not only impacting forest ecosystems. Fire use and wildfire occurrence in the cultural landscapes of the region shaped by agriculture, pastoralism and forestry, have considerable positive and negative impacts on landscape patterns, land productivity, biodiversity and the atmosphere, with considerable implications for air quality, human health and security, and climate change.

Examples of conventions that are addressing tangible and pressing regional issues and that are relevant – although not yet explicitly referred to – for potentially developing a regional “wildland fire regime”, include:

- The UNECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution;⁶
- The European Landscape Convention;⁷
- The Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)⁸

While a growing acknowledgment of these issues by science and the public can be noted, there is insufficient review, adjustment or development of appropriate fire management policies, especially with regards to:

- Effects of gas and particle emissions from open burning vegetation fires on human health;
- Vulnerability of industrial and rural societies to air pollution generated by vegetation fires;
- Impacts of radiatively active trace gases and particles emitted by vegetation fires, which affect composition and functioning of the atmosphere and contribute to climate change;
- Impacts of fire emissions on ecosystem processes; e.g. the consequences of the transport and deposition of fire-emitted black carbon to the arctic environment and its consequences on accelerating melting of ice and snow cover;
- Resulting controversy in fire management; e.g. conflicting views on the acceptance of prescribed burning with regards to emissions;
- Secondary problems associated with wildfires, e.g. those affecting contaminated vegetation, household and industrial waste and other hazardous materials, especially at the urban / residential perimeters.

Given the cross-boundary consequences of wildfires, e.g. transboundary transport of wildfire smoke pollutants, border-crossing wildfires and wildfire threats to common global assets such as biodiversity, terrestrial carbon pools, atmosphere and climate on the one side, and the willingness of nations side to share expertise and resources in fire management on the other, UNECE member states could develop voluntary principles and procedures on cross-border cooperation and thus enhance economics, interoperability and effectiveness in fire management between nations and regions.

⁴ http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/CentralAsia/CentralAsia_6.html

⁵ <http://lesscentr.ru/en/en/index0.htm>

⁶ <http://www.unece.org/env/lrtap/>

⁷ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/heritage/Landscape/default_en.asp

⁸ http://www.plantaeuropa.org/pe-wider_context-Bern.htm

Globally a number of bilateral and multilateral legal agreements as well as voluntary multilateral cooperative efforts reveal a rich experience of cross-boundary cooperation in fire management. Within the United Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) the above-mentioned UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire was established in the early 1980s to foster cooperation in fire management between the Member States. Since the early 1990s, the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) became responsible for the leadership of the Team and gradually expanded the scope of work to the global level. With the creation of the Global Wildland Fire Network (GWFN) in the early 2000s, a systematic approach towards international cooperation in fire management was initiated and became functional through voluntary cooperation within the Global Wildland Fire Network with its 14 Regional Wildland Fire Networks. A decade ago an informal International Wildland Fire Summit developed a number of recommendations aimed at streamlining cooperation in fire management at the global level. Yet, these recommendations have remained largely overlooked by national and international political and policy-making bodies.

A decade of experience in defining cooperative solutions in fire management between countries globally has identified that. While there have been advances in fire management in some countries, there are still barriers preventing the sharing of scientific and technical knowledge and good practice between wildfire agencies in different States. These barriers have resulted in some wildfire agencies being unintentionally excluded from the technical information and advancements that they could utilize to develop greater national resilience and preparedness for large wildfire incidents. It is often the lack of resilience of a State to manage its own wildfire situation that results in the need for unplanned international emergency assistance.

There is a political belief that the extent and the severity of the consequences of wildfire emergencies can be mitigated by providing improvised international firefighting assistance to the affected country. Indeed, such interventions are generally perceived positively as such missions provide humanitarian assistance and political support. However, experience reveals that international interventions, which are limited to wildfire emergency response, provide little benefit to the countries involved and do not address the underlining causes of the problem, often resulting on a dependence on future international assistance.

Given that some countries already possess advanced wildfire knowledge, and have the technologies and expertise to manage wildfire risk effectively. The priority of future international exchange should be to establish a mechanism that encourages this understanding to be shared between territories, enabling all countries to develop effective wildfire reduction strategies and providing the structure for more effective collaborative efforts during wildfire disaster situations.

In order to allow a coordinated, systematic approach for international cooperation in fire management, the GFMC and the UNISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group, which represents the interests and the members of the Global Wildland Fire Network, including the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire, have been preparing the convention of the “UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management”. This preparatory work began in 2010.

Aim and Strategic Objectives of the Forum

The main aim of the Forum is to elaborate recommendations to UNECE member states to

- Building resilience of nations and communities within the UNECE region to wildfire emergencies and disasters by enhancing national and collective regional fire management capability through international cooperation.

Three strategic objectives will be discussed:

- Development and adoption of a holistic approach to fire management and wildfire risk reduction within the UNECE Region and, potentially, globally.
- Development and strengthening of institutions and mechanisms to build national and international capacities and resilience to, and increase knowledge and understanding of, wildfire within the UNECE Region and, potentially, globally.
- Facilitation of a nurturing and sustainable culture of knowledge exchange and continual improvement for wildfire practitioners and policymakers within the UNECE Region and, potentially, globally.

The Forum will take advantage of recent insights of and solutions for contemporary and expected future wildfire problems in the region, notably in the Eurasian part. Inputs from UNECE member states and other regions from outside the UNECE will provide expertise in developing formal and informal bilateral and multilateral agreements on transboundary cooperation in fire management and thus initiate a more coordinated approach to cooperative fire management at the international level (confirmed attendance: Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN], Southern African Development Community [SADC]; Regional Wildland Fire Networks of South and Central America, South and Northeast Asia, Sub Sahara Africa).

The Forum will develop recommendations for national and coordinated international action. Such action should lead toward the development of specific mechanisms and guidelines for international cooperation in fire management and recommendations for a regional agreement on cross-boundary cooperation in fire management.

Thus, the Forum will be a first step towards the development of an agreement on international cooperation to enhance fire management capability in the region. The political and technical planning and consultation process in preparation for the Forum will be guided by the outcomes of the International Wildland Fire Summit (2003) and the 4th and 5th International Wildland Fire Conferences (2007, 2011)⁹, and will serve the preparation of the 6th International Wildland Fire Conference in Korea (2015) at which regions are challenged to present the progress of enhanced regional cooperation in fire management.

The outcomes of the Forum shall be regarded as complementary to existing agreements and mechanisms. In its preparatory stage the Forum had been planned as a contribution to the “UN International Year of Forests” (2011) to further the objectives of the international forest and climate regimes. The outcomes shall contribute to the evolving of an “international wildland fire regime” as envisaged by the UNISDR Global Wildland Fire Network. For this reason the host and organizers of the Forum have invited representatives of political entities and networks from other regions of the world.

Preparation and Organization of the Forum

The Forum will be organized at the United Nations in Geneva by the Secretariat of the UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section and the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC), and co-sponsored by the Secretariat of the Euro-Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), through its work in the frame of the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC).¹⁰

The Forum will be prepared and led by the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) and members of the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire. The meeting is in line with the Team’s Terms of Reference 2008-2013.¹¹ The Team consists of officially appointed focal points of UNECE member states and invited representatives of international organizations and *ad-hoc* experts. Team members, under the overall coordination of the Team Leader, will be responsible for the planning process either as mandated representatives of UNECE member states reflecting the position of their agencies, or with their personal expert knowledge. A thoroughly planned forum shall be an important step towards enhancing cooperation between member countries of the UNECE Region, particularly those that have common international borders.

Preceding the Forum an analysis is currently conducted of the key factors determining the contemporary and expected future forest fire problems in the UNECE region. This will examine problems that are newly arising from changes in land use, socio-economical conditions and climate and which are threatening sustainable forest management. The state of current and need for future public policies that address the underlying causes of fire problems in the region will be analyzed. The Forum will particularly address countries that have displayed limited enhancement of fire management capabilities; be it as a consequence of political and administrative transition or due to difficult

⁹ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/southafrica-2011.html>

¹⁰ The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) is sponsored by UNDP, UNEP, OSCE, NATO, UNECE and REC (Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe)

¹¹ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/intro/ToRs-ToS-Forest-Fire-2008-2013-Revised-June-2010.pdf>

economic conditions, or due to extraordinary fire-related challenges. The aim is to identify the situations in which such countries would benefit from the experience of their neighbors. In support of the preparation of the study and for further evaluation the UNECE member states have been asked to fill a comprehensive questionnaire.

Based on the pre-Forum analysis described above, policy recommendations for fire management in the UNECE region will be drafted in the form of a “White Paper on the State of Wildfires and Fire Management in Forests and other Vegetation Resources in the UNECE Region”, which will complement and refer to the “White Paper on Vegetation Fires and Global Change” (published by GFMC in August 2013).¹²

Furthermore, two preparatory activities of the Forum have drafted proposals for a systematic approach in international cooperation aimed at enhancing preparedness and efficiency in ground and aerial management of fire emergency situations:

- The first activity was tasked to develop a proposal outlining how to build national resilience to wildfires within the UNECE Region through the development of a culture of preparedness. For this activity the “International Working Group on Cooperation in Wildfire Preparedness and Response” (IWG-CWPR) was formed and includes representatives from the UNECE member states of France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.
- The second activity was tasked to elaborate a proposal for the adoption of Voluntary Guidelines for Fire Aviation. The voluntary guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are aimed at enhancing safety, efficiency and effectiveness of aerial firefighting operations at national and multinational incidents. This work was conducted by the International Fire Aviation Working Group (IFAWG)¹³, which is working under the umbrella of the UNISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group (GFMC serving as Secretariat) and includes representatives from UNECE member states (Canada, Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain, U.S.A.) and other regions (Australia, Chile, South Africa, South Korea).

The two groups worked in close cooperation with one another to ensure that overlapping issues were considered and addressed.

The draft White Paper and the draft proposals will be presented to the participants of the Forum prior to the meeting.

¹² <http://forestrybooks.com/>

¹³ <http://www.ifawg.org/>

Agenda of the Forum

Venue: United Nations, Geneva, Palais des Nations, Salle VIII

Wednesday 27 November 2013

10:00-18:00

Preparatory event preceding the Forum: Business meeting of the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire

Agenda:

- Evaluation of responses by UNECE member states and other invitees on materials circulated before the Forum
- Preparation of draft statement of the Forum
- Revision of the final agenda of 28-29 November 2013
- Other business: Phasing out of the ToS by 31 July 2013

Thursday 28 November 2013

09:30-18:00

Forum Day 1

09:30 Registration

10:00 Statements by hosts, co-sponsors

- UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section (Paola Deda, Dominique Reeb)
- Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) (Johann G. Goldammer)
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (Pieter van Lierop)
- Secretariat, UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction /UNISDR) (t.b.c.)
- Secretariat, Euro-Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), Council of Europe (Francesc Pla)
- Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (t.b.c.)

10:30 Presentation of Forum Papers

- Study on the contemporary and expected future forest fire issues in the UNECE region, with reference to "White Paper on Vegetation Fires and Global Change" (Johann G. Goldammer)
- Preliminary evaluation of the questionnaire (Peter W. Sheldon)
- Proposal of the International Working Group on Cooperation in Wildfire Preparedness and Response (IWG-CWPR): "Building Resilience of Nations and Communities within the UNECE Region to Wildfire Emergencies and Disasters" (Mark Jones)
- Proposal by the International Fire Aviation Working Group (IFAWG): Adoption of "Voluntary Guidelines for Fire Aviation" (Richard Alder)
- Draft "White Paper on the State of Wildfires and Fire Management in Forests and other Vegetation Resources in the UNECE Region" (Johann G. Goldammer)

11:30 Coffee break

- 12:00 Other statements
- Briefing on the UNECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (LRTAP) by LRTAP Secretariat (t.b.c.)
- Moderated discussion: Format of work, e.g. by formation of Working Groups for afternoon breakout discussions. Suggested Working Groups (t.b.c.):
- WildFire Support Mechanism (WFSM)
 - Fire Aviation Guidelines
 - Definition of Secretariat / Host of a future WFSM
- 13:00 Lunch break
- 14:00 Breakout in Working Groups
- 16:00 Coffee break
- 16:30 Breakout in Working Groups (continued)
- 17:30 Plenary
Interim discussion / review of Working Group approaches
- 18:00 Adjourn
Welcome reception
- 20:00 Drafting Team to prepare a Draft Forum Statement

Friday 29 November 2013

09:30-17:00 / 18:00

Forum Day 2

- 09:30 Plenary or Working Groups: Finalization of discussion and drafting of recommendations
- 11:00 Coffee break
- 11:30 Plenary: Finalization of discussion and adoption of recommendations for cross-boundary cooperation in fire management in the UNECE Region
- 13:00 Lunch break
- 14:00 International (global) consultation
Statement from Regions
- Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN Secretariat) (Raman Letchumanan)
 - Southern African Development Community (SADC Secretariat) (Moses Chakanga)
 - Sub Sahara Africa Region (Regional Sub Sahara Wildland Fire Network, Ghana) (David Asare)
 - South America (Regional South America Wildland Fire Network, IBAMA, PREVFOGO, Brazil) (Larah Steil)
 - Central America (Central American Fire Management Strategy, Programa Nacional de Manejo del Fuego SINAC-MINAE, Costa Rica) (Luis Diego Roman Madriz)
 - Asia (Regional Northeast Wildland Fire Network and Pan-Asia Wildland Fire Network Cluster, Korea Forest Service / Korea Forest Research Institute, Republic of Korea; and Regional South Asia Wildland Fire Network, Nepal) (Sundar P. Sharma, Byung-Doo Lee)
- Discussion and draft statement addressing opportunities for inter-regional cooperation (between UNECE Region and other regions)
- 18:00 End of Forum