# Proposal for more frequent voluntary reporting

Background paper 3

for discussion at the FRA 2025 Online Expert consultation

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## Introduction

The possibilities of implementing voluntary updates within the regular 5-year FRA reporting cycles have been discussed over the last five years, mainly as a result of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) reporting requirements where several of the indicators draw information from FRA and are reported upon annually by FAO to the SDG secretariat. While the SDG reporting process allows for repeating previous data arguing that no new data are available, FAO, as well as Member Nations, would like to see more up-to-date information reported to the SDGs, as well as in the dissemination of FAO statistics.

In July 2020, the 164th session of the FAO Council requested FAO to analyse the consequences of reducing the FRA reporting cycle to two years, to respond to an increased demand for timely and accurate information about the world’s forest resources for the monitoring of progress towards the SDGs as well as other international processes.

This request was further deliberated by the 25th session of the Committee on Forestry (COFO) held in October 2020, where the way forward for the Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) was discussed. Among other, the Committee requested FAO to:

1. *continue to produce an FRA report every five years;*
2. *develop, in consultation with Members, Collaborative Forest Resources Questionnaire (CFRQ) partners, international experts and other stakeholders, a flexible* *FRA reporting process that allows voluntary updates of key indicators related to SDG15 and other indicators at the discretion of Members, as new information allows, while ensuring data quality and transparency.*

The introduction of voluntary updates between regular reporting cycles is a major change to the FRA process and will have an impact on many parts of the process, including the terms of reference of the National Correspondents (NCs) and their Alternates, the review and quality control of reported data, and the validation process.

This background paper contains a proposal for the implementation of voluntary updates and presents a series of issues and implications that must be considered. It is a complement to the background paper on the process for the regular FRA reporting cycle. The Expert Consultation is expected to provide recommendations that allow FAO to further refine the proposal and implement it as part of the regular FRA reporting cycle.

## Proposal – voluntary updates in-between regular FRA cycles

This chapter discusses the key aspects to consider in order to implement voluntary updates, such as the scope and content of the updates, the timeline for implementation, the process, and the implications for countries as well as for the FRA Secretariat.

In the sections below, each of these aspects is further developed and a proposal for the way forward is presented.

### Scope

Considering the request expressed by COFO, voluntary updates should at least include the following FRA variables used to derive the indicators for the SDG reporting:

* Forest area and forest area change
* Above-ground biomass in forest
* Area of forest with a long-term management plan
* Area of forest within formally established protected areas

However, limiting an update to only these variables would lead to an inconsistent data set as many variables are intrinsically linked to each other. Forest area and biomass are linked to several other reporting variables, and although an update may not have to cover all FRA reporting variables, at least all variables related to forest area must be updated when there are new data on forest area/area change. Likewise, all variables related to stocks must be updated when new data on any of the stocks (growing stock, biomass, carbon) are available. This would ensure that the internal consistency of the data set is maintained.

The scope of the updates will have to be adjusted to the scope of each individual FRA, and considering the proposed reporting tables for FRA 2025, at least the following tables must be included in an update to ensure a consistent report:

Forest area related reporting tables:

* Table 1a – Extent of forest and other wooded land
* Table 1b – Forest characteristics
* Table 1c – Primary forest and special forest categories
* Table 1d – Annual forest expansion, deforestation and net change
* Table 3a – Designated management objective
* Table 3b – Forest area within protected areas and forest area with long-term management plans
* Table 4a – Forest ownership
* Table 4b – Holder of management rights of public forests

Stock-related reporting tables:

* Table 2a – Growing stock
* Table 2b – Growing stock composition
* Table 2c – Biomass stock
* Table 2d – Carbon stock

Updates of the remaining reporting tables would be optional; however, it is recommended to revise and update the entire report. For example, some countries may wish to update data on fires or disturbances to have new information displayed on the FRA platform.

Regarding the reporting years, the FRA 2025 specifications indicate the following reporting years for the FRA tables:

1990 2000 2010 2015 2020 2025

There are a few exceptions, such as disturbances and fire that will have individual years up to 2022, and ownership where the latest reporting year is 2020.

In addition, the Sustainable Development Goal 15 indicator tables displayed at the end of the report are generated using the data reported in the FRA tables. These tables begin in the year 2000 and have individual years between 2020 and 2025, so the time series will be:

2000 (2005)[[1]](#footnote-1) 2010 2015 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025

The annual data points between 2020 and 2025 are interpolated and countries will be able to override the interpolated values if they have data available for these years. Forest area reported in Table 1a will be interpolated to generate the 2005 value.

Based on the above, the FRA Secretariat proposes that a country that wishes to make a voluntary update should:

* As a minimum, revise/update all tables related to the SDG reporting where new data are available and/or there is a reason to modify previously reported data. If there are new data on forest area and/or forest area change, all tables related to forest area should be updated. Likewise, if there are new data on stocks (growing stock/biomass/carbon) all stock-related tables should be updated. This is to ensure that all area and stock estimates are consistent.
* It is strongly recommended to revise/update the entire report and also update other tables for which new data are available.
* All tables with new data should also have corresponding updates of the metadata, including data sources, national data, reclassification and estimation/forecasting.
* The update of the FRA tables should cover the same reporting years as the last full FRA report. For disturbances and fire, additional years can be added.
* The SDG tables should be updated with data for individual years up to 2025 with a possibility to add individual years up to the year before the update is done if new data are available for these years. No forecasting should be done beyond 2025. *Example: a voluntary update of forest area estimates made in 2027 should include all reporting years as of FRA 2025 (including an update of annual data between 2020 and 2025) and also 2026 if new data are available for 2026*.
* For all tables that are updated, historical data should be revised to ensure consistent time series.

### Time schedule for implementing voluntary updates

The following table presents a proposal for a time schedule for implementing voluntary updates, for the consideration of the Expert Consultation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **2023** | SDG submission based on FRA 2020 – no updates included  **Full Country reporting for FRA 2025.** All country reports should be submitted, reviewed and validated by end of 2023. |
| **2024** | Analysis of FRA 2025 data and preparation of FRA 2025 report  SDG submission includes new FRA data up to 2023[[2]](#footnote-2)  **Voluntary updates can be made**, maintaining the same reporting years for FRA tables and SDG tables as in FRA 2025. |
| **2025** | Launch of FRA 2025  SDG submission includes new FRA data up to 2025 (under embargo until FRA launch).  **Voluntary updates can be made**, maintaining the same reporting years for FRA tables and SDG tables as in FRA 2025. |
| **2026** | SDG submission based on FRA 2025 + updates made in 2025  **Voluntary updates can be made**, maintaining the same reporting years for FRA tables and SDG tables as in FRA 2025. |
| **2027** | SDG submission based on FRA 2025 + updates 2025 and 2026  **Voluntary updates can be made**, maintaining the same reporting years for FRA tables as in FRA 2025, and for SDG tables also including 2026. |
| **2028 and onwards** | SDG submission based on FRA 2025 + updates 2025, 2026 and 2027  2028 is the year for **full FRA country reporting,** hence no voluntary updates are made this year.  After evaluation, the cycle continues with necessary modifications depending on changes in scope and specifications for next FRA as well as possible changes in the SDG reporting framework. |

### Process for voluntary updates (to be implemented the years when updates are offered)

In order to implement voluntary updates, the process must follow a well-established and quite a strict timeline. If new data are to be included in the annual SDG reports, data must be available, reviewed and validated by the end of the calendar year.

Voluntary updates should only be made when countries have new data available and/or have found errors in previously reported data. Updates should not be made just to extend a forecasted time series based on data previously submitted for the FRA report, nor just for updating the metadata in the report.

A country that wishes to make a voluntary update has to communicate this to the FRA secretariat. This could be done through a functionality in the platform, or by other means. The process for this has to be further discussed with countries. This communication is important as it allows the FRA secretariat to selectively open the database only for the countries that wish to update and limit the review process to those countries.

The annual reporting process for voluntary updates is proposed to follow the general schedule outlined below. Some flexibility can be allowed to accommodate the needs of individual countries; however, the updated report must be ready for validation by the end of the third quarter to allow for the validation and possible final adjustments before the end of the year.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Firstquarter | Countries communicate to the FRA secretariat that they want to update the FRA report. A mechanism for this is to be further elaborated. |
| Second quarter | The database will be opened for updates for those countries that have communicated that they wish to update. Updated data should have been entered into the platform by end of June. |
| Third quarter | Review by the Secretariat, interaction with NCs to clarify issues and to ensure a transparent and consistent data set. |
| Fourth quarter | Validation, final adjustments if necessary, and closing of database before the end of the year. Data can thereby be available for the SDG reporting which is done in January-February the following year. |

### Implications for countries

Voluntary updates during regular reporting cycles have important implications for the countries. It provides an opportunity to include new national data, correct errors in previous reports and make new data accessible on the FRA platform as well as in the SDG database. However, it also implies additional work for the NC and his/her team to compile and enter new data and metadata into the platform; this may however reduce the workload for future FRA reporting.

A country that wishes to update, must communicate this to the FRA secretariat following a mechanism yet to be established.

As the reporting period is short, countries must allocate enough time for the NC and his7her team to make the update and interact with the FRA secretariat during the review process. The NC will be directly involved in the validation process.

Under this scheme, NCs will have a more permanent role and will be involved continuously in the FRA process. The terms of reference for NCs, therefore, need to be revised.

### Implications for the FRA secretariat

The introduction of voluntary updates also has implications for the FRA secretariat. A strict time plan for the annual update process must be developed. Fluid communication must be maintained with the NCs of those countries that have notified their interest to update, and the FRA platform must be adjusted to allow for annual voluntary updates as well as ensure that updates are made visible.

It will also require more work on reviewing updated reports as well as validation, analysis, preparation of aggregates and dissemination. All this will generate an additional permanent workload on the FRA Secretariat, as well as a temporary additional workload, in the beginning, to further develop and adapt the FRA platform to facilitate these updates. The financial implication of the increased workload has to be further analyzed.

On the positive side, the review burden will be spread over more years and there will be more time to individually support some countries and build their capacities, which could contribute to increasing the quality of the reports.

### Implication related to dissemination of new data

Voluntary updates in-between regular FRA reporting cycles have some implications on the dissemination of data. New data will be disseminated on the FRA platform, as well as in the SDG database and reports. Each update will in some way affect regional and global aggregates, and these aggregates will no longer be exactly the same as in the latest FRA report. It is important to consider how to disseminate the new data and make sure that new findings are communicated at the same time as they are made publicly available on the FRA platform. For example, an annual bulletin with the latest global forest statistics could be prepared and disseminated. Selected updated statistics could be included in the biannual SOFO publication. In summary, the dissemination package related to the voluntary updates needs further discussion and deliberations, as it also depends on how many countries (and corresponding forest area) decide to make voluntary updates.

1. Reporting year 2005 is included in the SDG reporting section only for forest area (Indicator 15.1.1) and for computing annual forest area change rates (indicator 15.2.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An SDG submission in 2024 that includes new FRA data up to 2023 will show that FAO is taking action on the more frequent reporting. However, it also means that new FRA data would be in the SDG database before the launch of FRA 2025. And as SDG submissions requires data to be aggregated at regional and global levels, it would be possible to extract regional and global aggregates up to 2023 from the SDG database, and there is a potential risk that someone will publish new findings, sourcing the SDG database, before the FRA 2025 report is launched. This risk should be carefully assessed before deciding on how to manage the 2024 SDG submission. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)