

Development of a Global Forest Information Service (GFIS) as a CPF Initiative

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Goals of the Initiative:

- Enhance access to all types of forest information, ensuring that it is accessible to governments and to all stakeholders, including researchers, forest managers, NGOs, community groups and the public at large;
- Contribute to an improved understanding of complex forest related issues, to better decision-making as well as a to a more informed public engagement in forest policy and forest management at all levels.

1 Background

The importance of access to forest-related information for the sustainable development of the world's forests was recognized at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. The Forest Principles agreed at UNCED underline the importance of timely, reliable and accurate information for public understanding and informed decision making. UNCED, *inter alia*, concluded that “existing national and international mechanisms of information processing and exchange (...) should be strengthened to ensure effective and equitable availability of information”.ⁱ

In 1998, the International Consultation on Research and Information Systems in Forestry (ICRIS) held in Gmunden, Austria, recommended that the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) should “endorse and promote the development of a Global Forest Information Service to enhance access to all forest-related information, ensuring that it is accessible to all stakeholders including policy-makers, forest managers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups and the public at large”.ⁱⁱ As a consequence, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) called for promoting the provision and efficient sharing of existing information and the strengthening of networks and specifically “requested IFF member organizations to work with IUFRO in exploring possibilities for a global forest information service”.ⁱⁱⁱ

In implementing the request of IFF, IUFRO initiated various activities to establish a Global Forest Information Service – GFIS. These included the establishment of a GFIS Task Force, the development of a GFIS information server, the development of a web-interface (www.gfis.net) as well as the implementation of the “GFIS Africa” project to strengthen institutional capacities. In order to develop the GFIS prototype significant investments have been made by IUFRO and its member institutions. Substantial in-kind contributions have been made by key partners, such as CIFOR and FAO.

The first version of GFIS was presented at the IUFRO European Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, in August 2002. The current GFIS prototype was successfully demonstrated at the XII World Forestry Congress in Quebec, Canada, in September 2003, and now includes about 120.000 metadata records contributed by about 60 forestry institutions from all regions of the world.

Since the beginning of 2004 GFIS partners have been working to bring the GFIS prototype into a quality production mode with more stable and long-term arrangements for financial and other contributions.

In May 2004, the members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) agreed that GFIS should become a joint CPF Initiative. CPF decided “that IUFRO, as focal point for the initiative, would develop, in collaboration with FAO and CIFOR, a proposal for the further development of GFIS as a joint CPF initiative for the consideration of CPF members at their next meeting”.^{iv} Based on this decision it is expected that CPF will provide an institutional platform that will facilitate the further development of GFIS.

2 GFIS Concept

Goal

The overall goal of GFIS is to enhance access to all types of forest information, ensuring that it is accessible to governments and to all stakeholders, including researchers, forest managers, NGOs, community groups and the public at large.

By doing so, GFIS aims to contribute to an improved understanding of complex forest related issues, to better decision-making as well as to a more informed public engagement in forest policy and forest management at all levels.

Approach

GFIS is an internet gateway that provides access to various types of information resources through partnerships with information providers. A GFIS metadata search facility (in the style of commonly used Internet search facilities), allows the user to locate forest related information through a single entry point. To describe the content of this information GFIS will use a standardized metadata format and will provide conversion facilities for metadata submitted in other formats. In addition a universally accepted terminology facilitates the search operations and the respective results.

Further development of GFIS will draw upon the lessons learned from the GFIS prototype developed by IUFRO in collaboration with FAO, CIFOR and other collaborators as well as from similar system development efforts by other CPF members such as IUCN, CBD and ICRAF in order to best utilize the available knowledge and avoid overlaps.

Two processes will be followed for the successful implementation of GFIS:

1. **Partnership development** and continuation of already existing agreements with institutions related to forests and forestry on the provision of information to GFIS. Increased partnerships with such institutions will make it possible to guarantee GFIS users a comprehensive and structured access to information provided by each of these institutions while at the same time the institutions themselves will be promoted. Partnership arrangements will assist in identifying key information resources and in using common formats, means and methods by which the information is made available to GFIS.
2. **System development** which includes defining information processes, information standards, design and multilingual presentation of the GFIS gateway (www.gfis.net), development of search applications with user interfaces, harvesting and storage of metadata from GFIS information providers, development of GFIS-specific metadata, user feedback and system evaluations.

Benefits

Anticipated benefits of GFIS include:

For individual users and the member states of UNFF:

- easier and more efficient access to world-wide forest information;
- improved professional networks;
- improved knowledge base for publications, reports and other output.

For GFIS information providers:

- better visibility and recognition of information, leading to enhanced impact of organization;
- options to improve internal information management and to build related capacity as a result of GFIS involvement;
- exchange of information and knowledge with other information providers;

- less investments required to disseminate information;
- more user feedback.

For CPF:

- fulfilling requirement to provide broad access to forest information;
- enhanced collaboration among CPF members;
- potential synergies with other CPF initiatives.

3 Organization

GFIS, like other CPF initiatives, builds on contributions from CPF members under the overall guidance of CPF. The CPF will establish a Steering Committee (GFIS-SC) which gives recommendations on the GFIS implementation and report back to CPF on progress and for requesting strategic guidance.

IUFRO will chair the GFIS-SC, which will initially be composed of representatives of IUFRO, FAO and CIFOR. Based on suggestions from the GFIS-SC or CPF members, the membership can be expanded to include other CPF members as well as partners that are not members of CPF.

IUFRO in its capacity as leading institution for the GFIS initiative will continue to co-ordinate the GFIS implementation and administration out of the IUFRO Headquarters in Vienna in order to operationalise the recommendations of the GFIS-SC.

The GFIS-SC will also decide how to use the resources contributed (financial and in-kind) by CPF members and other partners based on agreed targets and work plans. The GFIS-SC may also support partners in seeking additional funds for GFIS related work, and may then refer to the CPF as an organizing platform for GFIS.

4 Implementation

Milestones

The overall aim is to bring the current GFIS prototype into a production mode with stable and long-lasting institutional arrangements, especially regarding partnerships and system development.

One year milestone: To launch GFIS at the IUFRO World Congress 2005 (August 2005) with established processes for searching among information provider databases, a multilingual user interface, and fully developed user functionality for metadata search, full text search and information resource browsing.

Five year milestone: In 2009 to have all IUFRO members and international forest-related bodies as GFIS information providers, to include extensive and direct user feedback and interaction with GFIS, to have a programme that supports developing country institutions to manage information, including to provide information to GFIS and to present GFIS at the XIII World Forestry Congress in 2009.

Components and contributions

Contributions from CPF members and other partners are required to implement GFIS. Below is an indicative list of components and the partner(s) that may be in a position to take responsibility for each:

Component	Leading contributors
Information provider partnership development, including to establish procedures and technology for extracting metadata	IUFRO with (regional) support from CIFOR and other CPF members based on successful mobilization of information providers to current prototype
Specification of metadata standards for use with all partners	FAO, building on joint experiences in GFIS, working with IUFRO and other partners, e.g. WAICENT and CABI
GFIS multilingual gateway with information browsing functions and access to search function	FAO based on capacity for web-based multilingual information management
Metadata maintenance and refinement of search functionalities	IUFRO, with support of CIFOR, FAO and CABI, building on the GFIS prototype
Training and capacity building	IUFRO, CIFOR and FAO through the field programmes of the respective organisations
GFIS coordination and documentation	IUFRO

Budgets and extra-budgetary requirements will have to be considered by the individual CPF members and discussed in the GFIS-SC, which should also consider the development of a comprehensive sponsorship strategy.

ⁱ United Nations General Assembly, Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992.

ⁱⁱ International Consultation on Research and Information Systems in Forestry. An Austrian and Indonesian Initiative in Support of the Programme of Work of the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests. September 1998, Gmunden, Austria. Proceedings published by: Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Vienna, Austria. December 1998

ⁱⁱⁱ IFF Proposal for Action 98c

^{iv} Summary Report of the Twelfth Meeting of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (2 and 7 May 2004, Geneva)