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Georgia getting ready for reforms in forestry

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After reforms enacted in 2007, the Georgian forestry sector is undergoing changes. The new Law of Georgia on Forest, being drafted by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, will be presented to the Parliament in a couple of weeks. That's according to Alexander Khetaguri, the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources.

The cause for action "is the current counterproductive legislation, both institutionally and legally, Khetaguri declared at the Heinrich Boell Foundation, South Caucasus regional office where new reforms in the forest sector were discussed on November 9. "If the sector is left neglected as it is now, we will see our country deforested in 10 years."

Environmentalists come into accord on the point of forestry legislation improvement and necessity of urgent reforms in the sector but criticize the current draft version as being unsustainable and weak in "finding golden middle between the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental protection." However, they emphasize that in case lawmakers take into account the viewpoint of experts, there is the potential that Georgia will finally see a proper forest law.

Among other comprehensive changes, which will "redefine forests," the upcoming law suggests that the territory of Georgia be divided into 44 districts, the forests classified under MCPFE (Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe) categories and then leased for 49 years to the private sector.

Freed from lease fees for two years the leaseholder, as the minister declares, will conduct the inventory of the resources on its territory and be granted the right to start commercial logging only after the plan is approved by the government, claiming that the goal is to attract business which will invest in sustainable management of forests. "The longer the lease duration, the better economically motivated the leaseholder will be to recover what it fells and thus create reproduction cycle," Khetaguri said.

The new law, which replicates the Austrian model will refer exclusively to utilization of forest resources and illegal logging eradication. "It will ensure sustainable management of forests," Khetaguri said.

Dr. Irakli Macharashvili, Biodiversity Program Coordinator at Green Alternative, an environmental advocacy NGO based in Tbilisi and the professor at Ilia State University points to some "significant lapses" in the draft law presented by the ministry such as: issue of clear-cutting in natural forests; lack of national environmental legislation and nature protection international commitments' reflection in the draft law; the lack of involvement of society in the decision making process; impractical chances for new protected areas' creation; and dissonance between leaseholder's rights and obligations.

Protected areas are one of the pivotal concerns related to the new forest law. Conservationists fear that in the absence of powerful group of lobbyists of nature conservation policy, the new law can prevent creation of new protected areas in the future.

Protected areas currently occupy about 7 percent of Georgia's total territory, out of which only a third is forested. Khetaguri downplays any threat by stating that "each protected area has its specific law which is passed individually. Thus, having the equal legal force, the forest law will not come into conflict or exclude the possibility of creation of a new protected area."

Nino Chkhobadze of Greens Movement of Georgia/FoE Georgia co-Chair is skeptical about the economic profitability of the new forest law and states that forests of Georgia cannot prove profitable for commercial purposes as its productivity equals only 177 cubic meter of wood per hectare.

"These figures indicate that commercial logging cannot be viable there," she stated. Georgia's forests, she says, serve important ecological functions. "It forms the climate not only in Georgia

but throughout entire Caucasus," she explains.

Ilia Osepashvili of WWF Caucasus, a nature conservation organization, reveals that half of the forested area in Georgia is of low density. He says half of it is below the norm, which implies these zones need urgent recovery and protection from commercial logging.

"It is essential that preliminary assessment of resources be conducted in the forests in order to prevent the infringement of ecological balance. We can determine the volume of timber production capacity only after inventory procedures are done," he said.

If estimations are not accurate, he added, the profit for the state will be short-term but loss greater and in longer perspective.

Forests remaining in Georgia and especially in western part of Caucasus are ancient woodlands that have survived Ice Ages and other natural cataclysms. Having millions of years of continuous history, forests on the territory of Georgia and Caucasus are one of the very few virgin forests remaining in the world.

"In a nutshell, they are not just a cluster of trees but extremely complex ecosystems. Biodiversity here is much higher than on other landscapes located in the same climate zone," said Davit Tarkhnishvili, the Head of Institute of Ecology and professor of Ilia State University. "You can come across the variety of species here, you won't see anywhere in the world."

"The question," the professor added, "is will we see businesses investing in long-term utilization or focusing on recreational functions of forests as a result of reforms?"

By Salome Kobalava
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