Background

In Belarus forests cover 8 million hectares, approximately 38.5% of the entire country. In 2010, timber stock was 1.6 billion cubic meters and it is projected that in 2030 it will reach 2.2 billion which will be an important carbon sink in coming decades.

All forests belong to the state and 85% are managed by the Ministry of Forestry. This situation creates obstacles for the development of the private timber industry and causes conflicts of interests within state structures which manage, control, and actively use forest resources. Yet the strong state control on forests ensures low levels of illegal logging and protects forests from disastrous fires. All forests in Belarus were certified by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) in 2010 and half of Belarus’ state forest enterprises hold certificates under the Forest Stewardship Council system (FSC).

Belarus’ forests are important sources of employment and export income (roundwood, sawnwood, plywood mainly exported to EU countries) and for biodiversity protection. The Belovezhskaya Pushcha forest, a World Heritage site, hosts a viable population of European bison, the largest wild herbivore in Europe.

The Program

Following the approval of the ENPI FLEG country workplan in December 2009, a range of core activities have been identified and consolidated in 4 main areas:

- Improving the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) regulatory framework and efficiency of its enforcement;
- Improving the system of forest management, protection and utilization of forest products recording;
- Integrating FLEG processes into local forest management and utilization practices, including support to local initiatives;
- Improving information transparency of FLEG processes.

The ENPI FLEG team works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Forestry. The Program also collaborates with the Republic Forest Industries Association (RFIA), a leading timber industry; NGOs; the APB, which is the largest environmental organization in Belarus; and the association “Country Escape”, a business NGO in the area of agroecotourism.
The ENPI FLEG team performed an analysis of the quality of internet websites belonging to the Ministry of Forestry. The results were presented at an all-republic seminar in May 2010, where the decision to create websites for all forestry organizations in the country was adopted. A second inventory of internet sites, made in December 2010, showed a very substantial improvement in terms of quantity (85 out of 95 existing State forest enterprises have a website), but often a lack of quality of these tools. In close collaboration with the Ministry of Forestry’s press service the Program will work to improve the situation.

One of the most recent efforts under the ENPI FLEG Program included sharing experience on efficient ways to fight forest and bog fires. This became especially meaningful after the disastrous forest and peat bog fires in the Russian Federation in the summer of 2010 that affected millions of people. In Belarus in 2002, following severe drought and resulting bog fires, extensive bog areas had been re-wetted with the support of international donors. This process included nearly 30,000 hectares of peatlands. Despite limited financial resources these efforts were quite successful thanks to the active participation of local residents, environmental organizations and volunteers. The Program analyzed this knowledge and is ready to share it with all the countries where a potential danger of forest and peat bog fires exist.

A package of proposals aimed at improving forest management in Belarus was developed as a result of an analysis of the legislative base and existing forest resource management and usage systems in the country led by the ENPI FLEG Program. Part of these proposals has been reflected in the recently approved Government Program of Forest Sector Development for 2011-2015. Also at legislative level, it is significant that from 1 January 2010 the need for state licenses for logging operations or running tourism businesses was cancelled. This cancellation was a necessity for improving resource management and has created new opportunities to develop private business operations in Belarus’ forest sector. These opportunities include logging, reforestation, recreation and multiple use management of resources in general.