

**Statement at the opening of the Workshop on Sustainable Peatland Management
Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar 30 January 2014**

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Deputy Minister U Aye Myint Mg and Deputy Minister Dr Daw Thet Thet Zin
Ministry of Environment Conservation and Forestry, Government of Myanmar

Representatives of Government Agencies, Researchers and NGOs, Distinguished participants, Ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the ASEAN Peatland Forests Project (APFP) and the SEApeat Project I am very happy to make this opening statement at this workshop on Sustainable peatland management.

Globally Peatlands are one of the most important wetland ecosystems playing a critical role in climate regulation, water storage and supply, biodiversity conservation and local livelihoods. Peatlands only cover 3% of the land surface of the planet but they store 30% of the soil carbon or double the carbon stored in the biomass of all the world's forests combined. They are the most important terrestrial ecosystem for climate regulation and only terrestrial ecosystem creating long term carbon stores. All of the world coal and part of its oil and gas were formed in peatlands in past millennia. They store 10% of the earth's freshwater and are found at the source of many of the world's river systems such as the Yangtze, yellow and Mekong rivers.

In the ASEAN region, there are about 25 million ha of peatlands forming 60% of the global tropical peat resource. The largest area of peatlands occurs in Indonesia but all ASEAN countries have some peatland area. Although peatlands in the region provide critical ecosystem services worth billions of dollars – many of them have been degraded through unsustainable land use practices including clearing, drainage and burning. For the past 20 years ASEAN nations have been regularly covered in smoke from peatland fires – which cause 95% of the transboundary haze in the southern ASEAN region and causing billions of dollars of direct and indirect losses and health impacts for millions of people.

In response, ASEAN member states have adopted the ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy 2006-2020 and set clear targets to clearly identify and introduce sustainable management practices for all peatlands. Restrictions are being placed by governments on further clearance of peatlands for example with a moratorium on development of 15 million ha of peatlands by Indonesia. Investments are being made in protection and rehabilitation of other peatlands. Collaboration and exchange on best management practices for peatland restoration and use is increasing.

In Myanmar we know much less about peatlands although some researchers have estimated that as much as 200,000ha of peatland may occur in the country. Unfortunately, no accurate map exists. Recent work spearheaded by MOECA and FREDA with support from APFP/SEApeat have started to identify the country's peatlands. So far More than 15 sites have been identified with significant peatland

or organic soils. Some of the key sites are in Shan state with the largest being at Inle lake – a wildlife sanctuary and ASEAN Heritage Site. Inle lake is almost entirely surrounded by up to 10-12,000ha of peatlands which play a critical role in filtering and maintaining the water quality in the lake as well as sustaining the unique lifestyles of the local communities and rich biodiversity. Unfortunately these precious peatlands are degrading with much of the peatland drained, large areas developed for agriculture and some areas regularly burnt. Sensitive aquatic habitats are being polluted by agrochemicals and erosion of the watersheds is leading to silting of the peat and lake system. It is not too late to save Inle lake and its peatlands – but action must be taken soon to prevent further degradation and restore the peatlands.

This workshop on peatlands in Nay Pyi Taw is very timely. Three months ago – Ministers responsible for the environment from 10 ASEAN member states met in Surabaya Indonesia and confirmed the importance to sustainably manage all peatlands in the region by 2020. They approved the establishment of an ASEAN Task Force on Peatlands and the development of an ASEAN peatland programme with a budget of US\$130 million. This programme will help to identify and promote sustainable management of all peatlands in the region; prevent transboundary haze linked to peatland fires, rehabilitate degraded sites and conserve sites important for biodiversity and climate regulation. Myanmar as the head of ASEAN in 2014 has a key responsibility to show leadership in moving this programme forward.

I am very happy to see the range of agencies attending this workshop. Peatland management needs the engagement of a broad range of agencies and stakeholders including those responsible for forestry Environment water resources, agriculture and fishery as well as local government and communities.

I understand that this is one of the first dedicated national workshops on peatlands and so I hope it will play an important role in stimulating higher levels of collaboration and action to address peatland management in Myanmar. The Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry- being responsible for both wetland and environment management needs to take the lead in peatland management and formulate strategies and regulations to protect, rehabilitate and manage peatlands in conjunction with other stakeholders. Resources need to be allocated for further work on peatlands and swift action taken to prevent further degradation of key sites. Myanmar also needs to put together a clear proposal for inclusion in the ASEAN Peatland Programme and request national and international support. Last week the European Union agreed in principle to allocate \$14million to support the Programme at regional level. Myanmar should request support from partners including GEF to support this work.

I would like to thank a number of organizations for their support for this workshop: MOECAF and FREDIA for organizing the workshop and ASEAN Secretariat and IFAD-GEF for support through the APFP and European Union for support through SEApeat project. Finally in three days time it will be World Wetland Day (2nd February) – when all national around the world celebrate the value of wetlands and commit to their protection. I hope that this workshop will lead to clear recommendations to protect the peatlands of Myanmar - one of the unique and important wetlands of the world.

Thank you very much and good luck for the workshop