

Thirteenth Session of the Assembly
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Agenda Item 11.1

Asian Forest Living Lab Initiative

I. Background

1. The Asian Forest Living Lab Initiative was developed as a strategic response to growing demands from Member Countries for science-based, field-level solutions to address climate change, forest degradation, and ecosystem restoration, with a ten (10)-year timeline aligned with AFoCO Climate Action Plan (2025–2034). A core feature of the Initiative is the utilization of existing and upcoming AFoCO project sites as field demonstration areas—transforming them into “living laboratories” where innovative ideas, technologies, and practices can be tested, refined, and scaled under real-world conditions. This approach not only maximizes the value of ongoing project investments but also fosters continuous learning and knowledge beyond the standard project implementation cycle.
2. Pursuant to the endorsement at the Eleventh (11th) Session of the Assembly in 2024, the Secretariat has been actively advancing the development of Living Lab programs in collaboration with various donors and partners under the Asian Forest Living Lab Initiative. In 2025, AFoCO focused on developing three (3) key Living Lab programs: (a) the AFoCO–Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Living Lab Program, (b) the AFoCO–National Institute of Forest Science (NIFoS) Living Lab Program, and (c) the AFoCO–Korea Arboretum and Gardens Institute (KOAGI) Living Lab Program. These programs aim to serve as innovative platforms for research, field-based experimentation, and capacity building to address regional forestry challenges and support climate action.

II. Progress Update

A. AFoCO–ASEAN Living Lab Program

3. Since 2023, the Secretariat has actively engaged with ASEAN forest sector platforms to promote strategic cooperation on research and development. The AFoCO–ASEAN Forest Living Lab Initiative was formally introduced at the twenty-eighth (28th) Meeting of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Forestry (ASOF) held in October 2024, where AFoCO presented the concept as a regional mechanism to enhance field-based research, innovation, and capacity-building in response to climate-forest challenges. This was followed by a series of bilateral and multilateral consultations with ASEAN Member States and the ASEAN Secretariat, positioning the Living Lab Initiative as a key vehicle to operationalize the R&D component of AFoCO Climate Action Plan (2025–2034).

4. In 2025, the Initiative received formal endorsement by ASOF and was reflected in ASEAN sectoral strategies such as Food, Agriculture, and Forestry Sectoral Plan 2026–2030 and Post-2025 ASEAN Community Vision. The Initiative is designed as a long-term, multi-country program to utilize AFoCO project sites as "living laboratories" for testing nature-based solutions, climate technologies, and restoration models under real-world conditions. It will also establish thematic Working Groups (WGs) comprising Member Country experts and research institutions to facilitate science-to-policy integration and regional collaboration in forest-based climate adaptation. The Living Lab Initiative contributes directly to ASEAN's climate and biodiversity targets, while fostering country-led innovation and capacity development.

5. To initiate the first phase of implementation, the AFoCO Secretariat is preparing a project proposal for submission to the ASEAN–Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) in late 2025. The proposal seeks initial financial support to pilot the Living Lab model in selected Member Countries, including field research, knowledge platforms, and institutional coordination mechanisms. The Secretariat will continue to engage with ASEAN structures and national counterparts to finalize the proposal and align its design with ASEAN cooperation frameworks. Future efforts will also explore blended financing options to scale the Initiative into a regionally recognized platform for innovation in climate-resilient forestry.

B. AFoCO–NIFoS Living Lab Program

6. The AFoCO–NIFoS Living Lab Program seeks to establish experimental and demonstration models in priority thematic areas, with the aim of linking research, policy, and practice for sustainable forest management and climate resilience.

7. As part of this Initiative, the preparatory meetings were organized on 29-30 September 2025 to establish two (2) WGs in 2025 to guide the design and implementation of collaborative research and capacity development activities. These are: (a) the Mangrove Ecosystem Restoration Working Group, and (b) the Climate Change Adaptation Working Group.

- a. The preparatory meeting for establishment of the Mangrove Ecosystem Restoration WG reviewed regional challenges in mangrove degradation and identified restoration as a key thematic priority for AFoCO's engagement, particularly given the dual role of mangroves in biodiversity conservation and coastal protection.
- b. The preparatory meeting for establishment of the Climate Change Adaptation WG discussed how to identify regionally relevant adaptation priorities, including forest-based livelihood resilience, ecosystem-based adaptation strategies, and the role of forestry in supporting Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

8. In 2026, the Living Lab will officially launch the WGs through nomination by the Member Countries. These WGs will guide the formulation of pilot activities, ensuring that AFoCO and NIFoS can deliver tangible results that respond to Member Countries' priorities and contribute to regional and global climate agendas.

C. AFoCO- KOAGI Living Lab Program

9. The AFoCO–KOAGI Living Lab Program aims to strengthen regional cooperation on forest genetic resources through seed management, conservation, and applied research. It seeks to connect research institutions, policy-makers, and practitioners to develop sustainable systems for the conservation and restoration of wild tree species. This program aligns closely with AFoCO's

Climate Action Plan (2025–2034) and addresses the growing regional demand for high-quality seeds to support climate adaptation and forest landscape restoration.

10. As a key part of the program, a preparatory meeting was held on 10 June 2025 to establish the Seed Management WG under the Asian Forest Living Lab Initiative. During the meeting, participants reviewed and discussed the long-term vision for developing a regional seed management platform. It was agreed that KOAGI would lead technical coordination and support, drawing on its expertise in arboretum and garden-based conservation.

11. In 2026, the Living Lab will officially launch the WG through nomination by the Member Countries. The WG will guide the creation of a regional platform for collaboration on seed conservation, genetic diversity protection, and capacity building, with a particular focus on activating and expanding seed deposits to the Baekdudaegan Global Seed Vault (BGSV). This seed deposit mechanism will serve as the foundation for safeguarding wild and endangered tree species across Asia, ensuring their long-term preservation.

III. Plan for 2026

12. The Secretariat will continue advancing the Living Lab Initiative by mobilizing resources, expanding its geographic coverage, and diversifying its thematic focus within the forestry sector. In 2026, targeted efforts will be made to promote the Living Lab through global platforms, including showcasing the Initiative at side events during ASEAN and UN meetings and increasing its visibility through AFoCO's official website and communication channels. These actions aim to attract additional partners, raise awareness of the initiative's contributions to climate-resilient forestry, and enhance its profile as a flagship platform for innovation, collaboration, and the scaling of sustainable forestry solutions across Asia.

IV. Points for Consideration

13. The Assembly may wish to:

- a. Take note of the information and provide further guidance and recommendations, as appropriate; and
- b. Consider nominating members of the WGs to ensure timely establishment and effective operation of the Living Lab programs.

Queries on the content of the document may be addressed to:

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