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THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE

Countries, companies pledge to end deforestation

DINA CAPPIELLO AND ALEXANDRA OLSON | ASSOCIATED PRESS *Sept. 24, 2014*

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 30 countries set the first-ever deadline on Tuesday to end deforestation by 2030, but the feasibility of such a goal was eroded when a key player, Brazil, said it would not join.

The United States, Canada and the entire European Union signed on to a declaration to halve forest loss by 2020 and eliminate deforestation entirely by 2030.

“This is the family photo we have been looking for for decades,” said Charles McNeill, a senior environmental policy adviser for the U.N. Development Program in an interview with the Associated Press. “The forest issue is where everyone comes together.”

But, like any family, there were signs of dysfunction before the agreement was formally unveiled on Tuesday. Brazil, in an interview with AP, said it would not join.

Brazil’s position also highlighted the divisions between countries as they prepare to continue formal negotiations later this year in Peru in the hopes of meeting a late 2015 deadline for a new international treaty.

“Unfortunately, we were not consulted. But I think that it’s impossible to think that you can have a global forest initiative without Brazil on board. It doesn’t make sense,” said Brazilian Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira said in an interview Monday with The Associated Press.

If the goal is met, the U.N. says it would be the equivalent of taking every car off the road in the world. The group also pledged to restore more than one million square miles of forest worldwide by 2030. Norway vowed to spend \$350 million to protect forests in Peru and another \$100 million in Liberia.

But without Brazil, a halt to deforestation would nearly be impossible.

“A deforestation agreement without Brazil is like a carbon reduction plan without the United States,” said Paul Wapner, professor of international environmental policy at American University.

McNeill said “there were efforts to reach out to Brazilian government people but there wasn’t a response.”

“There was no desire to exclude Brazil,” said McNeill. “They are the most important country in this area. An effort that involves Brazil is much more powerful and impactful than one that doesn’t.”



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Teixeira says her government had concerns that the text could clash with Brazil's national laws, which allow for managed felling of the Amazon and other forests.

"It's different to have legal deforestation vs. illegal deforestation. Our national policy is we want to stop illegal deforestation," she said.

McNeill, who said the UNDP facilitated the forest declaration process, said the effort to get countries to sign on to the initiative would continue until the Paris summit. "Hopefully, Brazil will have a chance to get on board," he said.

Teixeira emphasized that Brazil is committed to protecting the Amazon rainforest, which is considered one of the world's most important natural defenses against global warming because of its capacity to absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide.

The minister said her country has set a goal of slowing the pace of deforestation to 3,900 square kilometers (1,505 square miles) annually by 2020. That would be down from about 5,843 square kilometers (2,256 square miles) in the August 2012 through July 2013 period, when Brazil made its last annual survey measuring the destruction of the forest by studying satellite images.

Brazil's rate of deforestation has fallen 79 percent since 2004, according to government figures. But last year, the government reported that annual destruction of its Amazon rainforest jumped by 28 percent after four straight years of declines.

The destruction was still the second-lowest amount of jungle destroyed since Brazil began tracking deforestation in 1988, but environmental activists blamed the increase on recent loosening of Brazil's environmental law meant to protect the jungle. They also say that the government's push for big infrastructure projects like dams, roads and railways is pushing deforestation.

Teixeira denied that the increase had anything to do with the revised Forest Code law, which was passed two years ago after more than a decade of efforts by Brazil's powerful agricultural lobby. The changes mostly eased restrictions for landowners with smaller properties, allowing them to clear land closer to riverbanks and other measures.

On the broader climate change talks, Teixeira said Brazil — the world's sixth largest emitter of carbon dioxide — is open to a binding treaty that would commit every country to emission reduction targets for beyond 2020, "but only if every country is on board."

After the last climate change talks in Copenhagen five years ago, which failed to produce a binding treaty, Brazil set a voluntary goal of reducing its emissions by nearly 40 percent by 2020, mostly through reducing deforestation and promoting renewable energy and sustainable agriculture.

Associated Press writers Dina Cappiello and Seth Borenstein contributed to this story.





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