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Logging Opens Dispute Between The EU And Poland

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Heard on [Morning Edition](#)



[SORAYA SARHADDI NELSON](#)

The Polish government's decision to allow logging in one of Europe's last remaining primeval forests has led to a bitter fight between Warsaw and the European Union.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

Poland is at odds with much of the rest of the European Union. This is because its government cracks down on everything from press freedom to public demonstrations. The country has also turned away refugees from its borders. And Brussels has warned Warsaw's populist government might soon face sanctions over what critics say are attacks on Polish democracy.

But it is the Polish government's treatment of trees, and not civil rights, that has landed Warsaw in the most trouble yet. These trees are in a forest that straddles the Polish-Belarusian border. And NPR's Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson is on the line. And, Soraya, you're actually in this forest, right?

SORAYA SARHADDI NELSON, BYLINE: In a village which is deep inside the Bialowieza Forest, which is one of the last remaining old-growth forests here in Europe. It's home to a number of endangered species like the European bison which is taller but lighter than its American cousin. I mean, we're talking about a large forest here. It's 350,000 acres in size. A third of it's in Poland, two-thirds of it's in Belarus.

It's a World Heritage site, according to the U.N. And it's supposed to be protected by international and local laws, which means that logging here is supposed to be strictly controlled. But the Polish government last year expanded the quota. And there's three times more logging here than before. And that's triggered an international crisis.

GREENE: OK, so why does the Polish government want to allow all of this logging?

NELSON: Well, they say it has to do with this little critter known as a bark beetle which, apparently, is destroying many European spruce trees here in the forest. And that's the kind of tree that's mainly being cut down. But the many critics here - and we're talking about environmentalists, and academics and international officials - say it's more about making money, that logging here is a multi-billion dollar business in Poland.



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One of the critics is Polish journalist Adam Wajrak (ph), and he lives in one of the villages inside the forest. He says the logging is threatening endangered species like the three-toed woodpecker.

ADAM WAJRAK: This is, like, just massacre. It's like a war. It's like, you know, I don't know if you - what you can compare it to, you know? These birds are losing habitat for breeding. These birds are losing habitat for feeding. This is just, like, to destroy the coral reef with TNT, you know? This is more or less like that.

GREENE: Soraya, I hope you're able to bring back a photo of a three-toed woodpecker.

NELSON: (Laughter).

GREENE: But so what - this journalist and other people who are concerned about this, what are they doing?

NELSON: Well, the main thing is public awareness and documenting what's happening for the legal challenges that are going to ensue here, as well human blockades. And those are being done by a camp full of anti-logging activists which includes some Greenpeace members. And what they do is they figure out where the loggers are operating, and then they try to stop the mechanical harvesters that they're using from operating.

But the loggers and local officials are fighting back. They've brought in gun-toting foresters from around the country like this guy who stopped us. I was with a small activist patrol tagging along this morning to try and see if we could see the logging up close.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: (Speaking foreign language).

NELSON: I was trying to explain what we want to see, but the forester orders us to leave. And he said the harvester vehicle was cutting down trees and that the section of forest and the road leading into it are closed to the public.

GREENE: All right, Soraya, if there are armed people involved here, this is - this sounds like a pretty - no small deal. I mean, what is Brussels and the European Commission doing about this?

NELSON: Well, they want an emergency logging ban imposed by the European Court of Justice. The problem is that that court is about to go on to recess after tomorrow. And so unless there's a ruling in the next day or so, nothing's going to happen before September, which means thousands more trees will be cut down.

GREENE: All right, Soraya, thanks so much.

NELSON: You're welcome, David.



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GREENE: Talking to NPR's Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, who is in a forest in Poland.

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