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## Illegal Logging Gives EU Massive Eco-Headache

**With tropical rainforests continuing to disappear at an alarming rate, the EU is partially to blame for importing illegally felled timber. So what is Brussels planning to do?**

On Monday, April 14, Greenpeace organized a demonstration outside the Brazilian embassy in Berlin to protest over-exploitation of tropical rainforests. According to a recent Greenpeace study, five hectares (12.4 acres) of forest are destroyed in Brazil per minute, with every hectare of forest burnt down releasing between 500 and 1100 tones of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Today, one fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions can be traced back to the destruction of the rainforests. According to the World Wildlife Fund, areas the size of 30 football pitches are disappearing every minute.

The problem of illegal logging is particularly acute in Indonesia, allegedly the world's third largest producer of greenhouse gases. Once hailed as one of the best solutions to saving the planet from greenhouse gases and global warming, rising demand for palm oil has resulted in local companies burning woods and peat lands to make way for palm oil plantations which supply European markets.

### **The downside of the biodiesel boom**

It's a similar story in South America, spurred on by the biodiesel boom in Europe and the EU's controversial 2003 Biofuels Directive, which requires all member states to have 5.75 percent of transportation run by biofuel in 2010.

"This leads to further destruction of the rainforests," argues Celia Harvey from Conservation International.

Earlier this month, German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel scrapped government plans to raise compulsory bioethanol blending levels in fossil gasoline, citing the fact that the bioethanol used for blending in Germany was imported largely from third-world countries where deforestation may have taken place to expand farmland.

Less well-documented is the destruction of Scandinavia's forests, where logging is generally legal.

The World Bank, however, estimates that approximately 50 percent of worldwide logging is illegal, while a recent report by Friends of the Earth also asserted that "half of the timber imported by the EU from high-risk areas [including Central Africa, the Amazon, Russia and Indonesia] has been logged illegally."

### **Changing the law**

With the EU being the biggest importer, environmental groups are calling on Brussels to introduce a tropical rainforest conservation law.

"European governments have to ensure that only legally sourced timber and timber from sustainable forestry reaches the markets," said Corinna Hölzel from Greenpeace.

In 2006, both the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats rejected a draft German law to protect the rainforests, on the grounds that it was too complicated and that EU legislation would be preferable.

But studies on the EU's environment policies conducted at the Free University in Berlin show that effective legislation is only ever implemented when governments have the courage of their convictions and take the initiative.

"German politicians pay a lot of service to the principle that rainforest conservation is the best climate protection," says Johannes Zahnen from the World Wildlife Fund.

Switzerland, Britain and the US, meanwhile, are already planning new legislation on timber trading.

### **EU takes action**

In March, EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas announced that the Commission will be proposing new measures to tackle illegal logging this May, amid fears that the current EU legislation is not effective enough.

A Friends of the Earth report recently alleged that illegally logged timber was used in a number of EU-funded construction projects, while the Commission has admitted that 1000 square meters of illegally imported timber from Indonesia was even used in the renovation of its headquarters in Brussels.

Commissioner Dimas has now agreed that the illegal timber issue is "very important because it contributes to deforestation, which is detrimental for both climate change and biodiversity" -- issues which the EU executive is "determined to fight."

He said the EU executive had concluded voluntary agreements with Malaysia, Indonesia, Cameroon and Ghana, adding that discussions were underway to conclude similar accords with other countries.

### **Certification schemes**

These latest moves come in the wake of a voluntary licensing scheme for timber imports into the EU, designed to combat illegal timber felling first introduced in 2005 and inviting timber exporting countries to produce export licenses stating that their products were legally harvested.

But Johannes Zahnen says that much more needs to happen. Importers should be able to confirm that the material they purchase comes from a legal source with the help of certification and independent verification. This system already applies to foodstuffs, he points out, so why shouldn't it apply to wood?

Consumers are generally oblivious to where their garden chairs have come from, and according to Zahnen, most of the low-cost furniture sold in Europe is made of illegally logged wood.

### **Making the fight harder than it already is**

Moreover, existing certifications are not always reliable. The label PEFC (Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes), for example, is highly controversial. It allegedly fails to include crucial environmental protections, including protection for old-growth forests, wilderness and other endangered forests. It allows labeled products to contain non-certified content from most controversial sources, and it fails to require independent verification of wood products' origins.

WWF and Greenpeace recommend instead the stringent certification issued by the Forest Stewardship Council. The FSC, which is the world's leading forest certification system, ensures that forests meet a set of globally applicable, independent, performance-based standards for ecologically, socially, and economically responsible forestry.

In May, at the 9th Ordinary Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Bonn, the topic of illegal logging is set to top the agenda. If no new efforts to combat the destruction of the rainforests are agreed upon, the fight to stop climate change will become even harder than it already is.

DW staff (jp)

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