

Open Letter to the 117th Congress and Biden-Harris Administration on Tackling Global Deforestation

March 3, 2021

The undersigned civil society organizations call on Congress and the Biden-Harris administration to enact significant new trade rules and policy measures to support the health and well-being of the world's forests and the people who depend on them. As a critical element, we urge you to pass legislation to prevent agricultural commodities produced on illegally deforested land from entering the U.S. market and establish due diligence requirements on relevant commodity imports.

Over the past decade, the world has lost an area of forest the size of Virginia every year.¹ The global deforestation crisis is intricately connected to some of the most pressing problems we face. The degradation and loss of forests is one of the biggest contributors to climate change and biodiversity loss, and increases human exposure to zoonotic diseases such as Ebola and coronaviruses.² It is linked to land invasions and violence against Indigenous peoples, local communities, and environmental defenders, while feeding corruption and undermining rule of law.

In the tropics, the expansion of commercial agriculture, led by cattle and soy in South America and palm oil and pulp in Southeast Asia, is the biggest driver of deforestation. Nearly half of this forest conversion occurs illegally, and in Brazil the figure is even higher.³ Yet commodities produced on illegally converted lands continue to find unwitting consumers and investors in the United States and other major markets. In addition, the production of commodities such as palm oil, cocoa, and beef is commonly linked to forced and child labor.

Voluntary initiatives and corporate commitments have not done enough to curb deforestation over the past decade.⁴ Government leadership and regulatory frameworks are needed to drive systemic change and level the playing field for businesses at home and abroad trying to operate responsibly.

As one of the world's largest producers and consumers of agricultural commodities, the United States should play a key role in setting standards for trade and finance that protect people and the world's remaining forests. New regulations should improve industry due

¹ Roughly 42,000 square miles per year, based on annual deforestation estimates published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization for 2010 – 2020. This does not include vast areas of clear-cut logging in boreal and temperate forests or selective logging in tropical rainforests.

² For recent analysis of the climate mitigation potential of global forests, see <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rstb.2019.0126>; for recent analysis on the role of forest and wildlife protection in preventing pandemics, see <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/369/6502/379>

³ For global illegal deforestation estimates, see <https://www.forest-trends.org/publications/consumer-goods-and-deforestation/>; the monitoring initiative Mapbiomas estimated that most deforestation in Brazil in 2019 was unauthorized, see <http://alerta.mapbiomas.org/relatorios>

⁴ For an analysis of voluntary commitments by major companies, see: <https://forest500.org/publications/forest-500-annual-report-2019-companies-getting-it-wrong-deforestation/>

diligence, supply chain traceability, and transparency, building upon successes and lessons learned from existing laws designed to tackle human rights abuses and environmental harms linked to international trade, such as illegal fishing, illegal logging, forced labor, and conflict minerals.

The European Union and the United Kingdom are already developing regulatory measures to reduce the negative impacts their trade in agricultural commodities is having on forests and other natural ecosystems.⁵ The United States must join these efforts and not lag behind.

As a critical step in reducing our footprint on the world's forests, we urge you to enact legislation to prevent agricultural commodities produced on illegally deforested land from entering the U.S. market and require companies to carry out and report on risk-based due diligence, including supply chain traceability, on imports of commodities linked to deforestation. The United States should also increase support to and build partnerships with countries taking meaningful steps to address deforestation.

We look forward to working with Congress and the Biden-Harris administration to advance these vital measures as part of a broader policy and regulatory agenda to address the global drivers of forest loss and degradation and safeguard these essential ecosystems for the sake of our climate, our health, and the future of our planet.

Signatories:

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| ActionAid USA | Human Rights Watch |
| Amazon Watch | Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns |
| Amnesty International USA | Mighty Earth |
| Center for Biological Diversity | National Wildlife Federation |
| Climate Advisers | Oceanic Preservation Society |
| Columban Center for Advocacy
and Outreach | Oxfam America |
| Conservation International | Pax Christi USA |
| EarthRights International | Rainforest Action Network |
| Endangered Species Coalition | Rainforest Alliance |
| Environmental Investigation Agency | R2H Action [Right to Health], USA |
| Forest Trends | Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
Justice Team |
| Friends of the Earth US | The Nature Conservancy |
| Global Financial Integrity | Wildlife Conservation Society |
| Global Wildlife Conservation | World Wildlife Fund |
| Global Witness | |

⁵ For more information, see recent statements from the European Parliament: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20201016IPR89560/legislation-with-binding-measures-needed-to-stop-eu-driven-global-deforestation>; and UK government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-world-leading-new-measures-to-protect-rainforests>