



Open Letter to the 117th Congress and Biden-Harris Administration Urging Support for the FOREST Act as a Critical Tool to Help Tackle Deforestation and Associated Crime

October 6, 2021

The undersigned organizations urge Congress and the Biden-Harris administration to swiftly enact the Fostering Overseas Rule of Law and Environmentally Sound Trade (FOREST) Act led by Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Representatives Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) as a critical step in tackling global deforestation and forest degradation, climate change, and biodiversity loss while promoting good governance and leveling the playing field for responsible businesses at home and abroad.

Over the past decade, the world has lost an area of forest the size of Virginia every year.¹ The global deforestation crisis is closely connected to some of the most pressing problems we face. Forest loss and degradation are among the biggest contributors to climate change and biodiversity loss and are a root cause of zoonotic disease spillover events such as those related to Ebola and coronaviruses.² Forests contribute to the livelihoods and food security of well over a billion people around the world,³ and their loss is linked to land invasions and violence against Indigenous peoples, local communities, and environmental defenders⁴ while feeding corruption and organized crime and undermining rule of law.⁵

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 tropical forests, see: Griscom et al. [National mitigation potential from natural climate solutions in the tropics](#). *Phil. Trans. Of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2020); for recent analysis on the role of forest and wildlife protection in preventing pandemics of zoonotic origin, see: Dobson et al. [Ecology and economics for pandemic prevention](#). *Science* (July 24, 2020); and Tollefson, Jeff. [Why deforestation and extinctions make pandemics more likely](#). *Nature* (August 7, 2020).

³ Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank Group, 2013. [Managing Forest Resources for Sustainable Development: An Evaluation of World Bank Group Experience](#).

⁴ See [Human Rights Watch letter to the OECD](#), January 27, 2021, for an overview of the situation in Brazil.

⁵ See, for example: Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Dispatch*, March 19, 2021. [Good Climate Policy Should Fight Corruption and Organized Crime: They are key drivers of deforestation and environmental degradation](#).

In the tropics, the expansion of commercial agriculture, led by cattle and soy in South America and palm oil and pulp in Southeast Asia, drives 60% of deforestation.⁶ More than two-thirds of this conversion for agriculture occurs illegally.⁷ 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.⁸

Voluntary initiatives and corporate commitments have not done enough to curb deforestation and forest degradation over the past decade.⁹ Government leadership and regulatory frameworks are needed to drive systemic change in global commodity supply chains and level the playing field for businesses at home and abroad trying to operate responsibly.¹⁰

As one of the world's largest producers and consumers of agricultural commodities, the United States must play a key role in setting standards for trade and finance that promote good governance and protect people and the ecological integrity of the world's remaining forests. The European Union and the United Kingdom are in the process of developing regulatory measures to reduce the negative impacts their trade in agricultural commodities is having on forests and other natural ecosystems.¹¹ The United States must join these efforts and not lag behind.

As a critical step in reducing our footprint on the world's forests and fighting corruption and crime abroad, we urge you to enact the FOREST Act, which includes provisions to:

- Prohibit agricultural commodities produced on illegally deforested land from entering the U.S. market;
- Require companies to carry out and report on risk-based due diligence, including supply chain traceability, on imports of commodities linked to deforestation;
- Increase U.S. engagement with and support for countries taking meaningful steps to improve governance and reduce deforestation;
- Strengthen tools to tackle deforestation-related corruption and financial crime; and
- Establish a federal government procurement preference for zero-deforestation products.

We look forward to working with you to advance these measures as part of a broader policy and regulatory agenda to curb all natural ecosystem loss and degradation and safeguard these essential ecosystems for the sake of our climate, our health, and the future of our planet.

⁶ Forest Trends, May 18, 2021. [Illicit Harvest, Complicit Goods: The State of Illegal Deforestation for Agriculture](#).

⁷ Forest Trends, op. cit.

⁸ See, for example: Withhold Release Orders issued by U.S. Customs and Border Protection for palm oil and products containing palm oil made by two major Malaysian oil palm producers, [Sime Darby Plantation](#) and [FGV Holdings Berhad](#); U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs [webpage on child labor in cocoa production](#); Repórter Brasil, January 2021. [Slave Labor in Brazil's Meat Industry](#), summarized [by Reuters](#).

⁹ For an analysis of voluntary commitments by major companies, see: [Forest 500 annual assessment](#).

¹⁰ For recent commentary, see: Justin Adams, Financial Times Opinion, August 7, 2019. [Companies alone cannot tackle deforestation](#).

¹¹ For more information, see recent statements from the [European Parliament](#) and [UK government](#).

Signatories (updated May 11, 2022):

Accountability Lab
ActionAid USA
Amazon Watch
Amnesty International USA
Center for American Progress
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for International Environmental Law
Child Labor Coalition
Christian Council of Delmarva
Climate Advisers
Conservation International
Corporate Accountability Lab
EarthRights International
Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental Investigation Agency
Fair World Project
Fairtrade America
Food Tank
Foreign Policy for America
Forest Trends
Friends of the Earth US
Global Financial Integrity
Global Witness
Green America
Human Rights Watch
International Marine Mammal Project of Earth Island Institute
International Rights Advocates
Kiss the Ground
Liberty Shared
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mighty Earth
National Consumers League
National Wildlife Federation
Oceanic Preservation Society
OneNature
Oregon Zoo
Oxfam America
R2H Action [Right to Health], USA
Rainforest Action Network

Rainforest Alliance

Re:wild

REVERB

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team

Slow Factory

Slow Food USA

Southwest Environmental Center

The Nature Conservancy

TreePeople

World Wildlife Fund