

From rainforest to monoculture farming: Africa's forests 'threatened by palm oil rush'

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Greenpeace France warns that tropical forests could be lost to a palm oil bonanza that has already razed millions of hectares of south-east Asia.

Africa's tropical forests are threatened by a palm oil bonanza that has already razed millions of old-growth hectares in south-east Asia, Greenpeace France warned on Tuesday.

The NGO called on European palm and rubber plantation giant Socfin, which controls vast tracts of tropical land in more than half-a-dozen African nations, to join other multinationals in adopted so-called "zero deforestation" policies.

Dozens of global companies - GAR, Cargill, and Agropalma among commodity producers, and Nestle, Unilever and L'Oreal among makers of consumer products - have made pledges, though some are more stringent than others.

So far, Socfin - majority controlled by Belgian businessman Hubert Fabri, with French billionaire Vincent Bollore holding 38.8% of the company's shares - have failed to make similar commitments, Greenpeace said.

The stakes are high: palm oil, soy, paper pulp, and beef drive nearly three-quarters of deforestation in tropical areas, according to studies.

Deforestation from all sources is responsible for 12% of the greenhouse gases driving global warming.

Indonesia and Malaysia account for more than 90% of palm oil production today.

Clear-cutting and burning to make way for palm oil plantations causes health-wrecking air pollution, exacerbates climate change, and destroys some of the planet's richest "hotspots" for biodiversity.

The transformation of great swaths of rainforest to monoculture farming is also a mixed blessing for local populations, providing a source of low-wage employment but often displacing indigenous peoples and disrupting established livelihoods.

Currently, only a small percentage of palm oil comes from Africa, but Socfin operates numerous plantations there with others in the pipeline.

"Africa has become the new frontier for palm oil, the new battleground of oil palm and rubber tree companies," the Greenpeace report said.

The company has sought a €150m (\$165m) loan via the International Finance Corporation (IFC), an entity of the World Bank, to finance certification under environmental norms upheld by the IFC.

But Socfin does not meet even these modest standards - described by Greenpeace as “insufficient to prevent deforestation” - according to the IFC, which signalled “major gaps” between the palm and rubber giant’s operations and “good international industry practice.”

“The IFC must urgently suspend the ongoing corporate loan procedure and condition the granting of this loan on the company’s publication of a credible zero deforestation commitment,” Greenpeace said.

Made aware of the contents of the report, a spokesperson for the Groupe Bollere said that the company was “only a shareholder” of Socfin, and thus “can not be held directly responsible for the actions or decisions of Socfin.”

“Nonetheless,” Elodie Le Rol said by email, “the Groupe Bollere carries out its duty to be vigilant, and is an active shareholder and administrator of Socfin.”

The core provision of a zero deforestation policy is to identify and protect so-called “high carbon stock” areas.

These are forest regions that store huge quantities of carbon dioxide in living wood mass. Once it is cut down and burned, CO₂ is released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.

Another key provision is the protection of peatlands which - when drained to make way for a plantation - also spew CO₂ into the air.

Due to the rapid expansion of palm plantations and logging, Indonesia has become the sixth largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world.

Zero deforestation likewise includes guarantees that local populations are fairly compensated for lost land, and not otherwise adversely affected.

Socfin currently has 50,000 hectares (124,000 acres) in rubber plantations, and 80,000 hectares (198,000 acres) in palm oil trees in Africa.

The forests in the Congo basin cover some 200m hectares (500m acres) across six countries, and are home to more than 500 species of mammals, 400 reptiles and thousands of plants.

Between 1990 and 2010, at least 3.5m hectares of natural forests were converted into palm oil plantations, mainly in south-east Asia.

AFP

P.S.

* “Africa’s forests ‘threatened by palm oil rush’”. The Guardian. Tuesday 23 February 2016 09.52 GMT:

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/feb/23/africas-forests-threatened-by-palm-oil-rush>