



EU urged to ban all imports linked to deforestation



The EU has once again been asked to step up safeguards to ensure their imports don't facilitate deforestation in Latin America. Photo: Shutterstock, Michael Tatman

Brazilian environmental groups urged the European Union on Monday to pass aggressive legislation banning imports linked to deforestation, criticising “gaps” in a draft bill.

The letter from the 34 organisations comes as EU environment ministers prepare to meet Thursday in Brussels to discuss a proposal to ban products that fuel deforestation, which would slap controls on imports including beef, soy, palm oil, cocoa and coffee.

The groups said the draft proposal is “necessary and positive,” but needs “improvements” to truly fight deforestation. Brazil, home to 60 percent of the Amazon rainforest and a leading exporter of those products.

“Deforestation and conversion of natural ecosystems must be eradicated if humanity is to stand a chance of staving off global warming,” said the letter, signed by groups including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Brazil office, the CI Observatory and The Nature Conservancy.

They said the draft plan, presented in November, defines “forests” too narrowly. They told it excludes the major several key ecosystems in Brazil, including the Pantanal wetlands, the Cerrado savannah, and the Pampa lowlands.

They also urged EU officials to add more products to the controlled list, such as cotton, corn and canned meat, and ensure due diligence measures apply to entire farms, not just part of them.

“On large farms, an owner may maintain a deforestation-free production area for export to Europe and another area for deforestation,” they said.

They also called for “firm assurances” on human rights, particularly to ensure that agribusiness is not pushing out indigenous peoples from their lands.

The EU is among the first to draft such legislation since 141 countries signed the so-called Glasgow Declaration, which pledged to “halt and reverse” deforestation by 2030.

Brazil was among the signatories to the voluntary pledge, launched at the UN climate summit last November.

But deforestation has surged in the country in recent years, notably under President Jair Bolsonaro.

Since the far-right agribusiness ally took office in 2019, average annual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has increased by more than 75 percent from the previous decade, to an area bigger than Jamaica.

According to a 2020 report, one-fifth of beef and soybean exports from Brazil to the EU is produced on land that has been illegally deforested.

A dozen researchers from Brazil, Germany and the United States used powerful software to analyse 815,000 properties and identify areas of illegal deforestation in the Amazon and Cerrado, the vast tropical savanna in the centre of Brazil.

“Between 18 and 22% – possibly more – of annual exports from Brazil to the EU are the fruit of illegal deforestation,” said Raoni Rajao, the project leader and professor at Brazil’s Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG).

The authors stressed, though, that “close to 80% of Brazilian farmers respect the Forest Code” and that the software would allow authorities to “take rapid and decisive measures against offenders.”

In terms of soy consumption, the World Wildlife Federation found that European citizens indirectly consume a significant amount of the product as it is used to feed animals.

Over 80% of the world production of soybeans is localised in Brazil, the United States, and Argentina combined. At the same time, EU countries and the UK produce less than 1% of the global total.

For this reason, and because soy is not a key ingredient in the diets of EU and UK citizens, its presence in the food supply chain is underestimated.

However, while direct use of soybeans and soybean oil for food amounts to 3.5 kilograms per citizen year estimated 55 kilograms of soy is embedded in the consumption of animal products like meat, dairy, eggs and fish, according to calculations included in a report commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

For the WWF, this means that Europeans are unwittingly wiping out forests across the world, contributing to the destruction of precious natural ecosystems.

This is not the first time that Brazilian stakeholders, including indigenous communities, have called on the EU to strengthen safeguards in place.

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