

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 19 MAY AT 00:01 GMT//18 MAY AT 20:00 EST**

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## New Report: Tropical Forests the Size of Denmark *Illegally* Cleared Every Year for Commercial Crops Consumed Worldwide

*The criminal destruction of rainforests for commodities such as beef, chocolate, soy and palm oil knocks down 4.5 million hectares and releases 2.7 gigatons of emissions a year*

WASHINGTON, DC (18 MAY 2021)—A new study released today finds that **at least 69% of the tropical forests destroyed for agricultural commodities between 2013 and 2019 was done so illicitly**, in violation of national laws and regulations. This marks an increase by one-third in the unlawful clearing of tropical forests for commercial agriculture since [Forest Trends first quantified the crisis in 2014](#).

“We should all be shocked that illegal clearing for commercial agriculture is the largest driver of deforestation—and that it’s getting bigger. If we don’t urgently stop this unlawful deforestation, we don’t have a chance to beat the three crises facing humanity: climate change, biodiversity loss and emerging pandemics,” said lead co-author Art Blundell, who headed up the Forest Trends study, *Illicit Harvest, Complicit Goods*.

It is well documented that commercial agriculture is the leading cause of deforestation worldwide—and a major source of global warming. This new study is the only one of its kind to reveal the extent to which agricultural commodities produced in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Africa and exported worldwide are linked back to *illegal* forest destruction.

“There is no quick fix for saving the world’s tropical forests but stamping out illegal forest destruction for agricultural commodities is fundamental to any solution,” said Cassie Dummett, the report’s lead co-author. “Fully understanding the scope of the illegality crisis is a challenge given that so many countries fail to report data about illegal deforestation, and reliable country-wide data is scarce. Nonetheless, we lay out clear evidence in this report that the problem is too large—and growing too fast—to ignore.”

The bulk of the illegal clearing identified in this report took place in two countries (Brazil and Indonesia) and is linked to commodities such as cattle, palm oil, soy and pulp plantations—an estimated one-third of which is exported to the U.S., China, U.K., Europe and beyond. Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Malaysia also had high levels of illegal clearing.

### **Carbon Impacts**

Released in advance of the climate talks in Glasgow, where forest protection is expected to top the agenda, the report points to how we can shore up the role of forests-at-risk as

a carbon sink. The study finds that carbon emitted from illegal forest clearing for commercial agriculture accounts for at least 41% of all emissions from tropical deforestation—equal to 2.7 gigatons of carbon each year, a total of 19 gigatons over the seven-year period. More than 70% of these emissions reportedly came from illegally cleared forests in Latin America, mainly Brazil, due to its outsized role in illegal forest clearing.

### **Smoke & Mirrors**

To determine the extent to which agricultural commodities—consumed domestically and abroad—are grown on lands illegally cleared of forests, the authors examined available data on illegal deforestation in 23 forested nations of Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa. The study builds on the 2014 report that put the illegal deforestation crisis on the map and finds that even more forests are being illegally cleared to make way for agricultural commodities than ever before—an increased annual average rate of 28%.

For the report, authors relied on well-documented cases of illegality. “As a result, the findings—even though they are alarming and demonstrate a serious problem—are clearly underestimates of the problem. The fact that we are conservative and the numbers are so large should worry everyone,” Blundell said.

### **Importing the Problem**

The report found that 31% of all agricultural commodities produced on deforested lands—legal or otherwise—were exported. In 2019 alone, US\$55 billion in exports from the 23 case study countries were linked to rainforest destruction across 10 commodities, most of which were grown in Latin America and Asia. As a result, consumers in Europe, the U.K., China, the U.S. and any other country that imports these commodities risk complicity when they purchase these products at home.

“Illegal deforestation is a key driver of forest loss and creates significant risk for supply chain companies and financial institutions that may unwittingly supply or finance illegally sourced commodities,” said Justin Adams, Executive Director of the Tropical Forest Alliance. “This report provides a helpful overview of the issue and calls out the criticality of enhanced traceability and transparency to provide relevant and timely information for key actors in the supply chain.”

The following agricultural commodities are particularly problematic.

- Regulators must take the closest note of beef, palm oil, soy and cocoa, as they have the highest levels of illegality.
- Brazil is an especially risky country; nearly all (at least 95%) of deforestation in Brazil in 2019 was illegal.
- Indonesia is also risky; the government’s own audit found more than 80% of the clearing for palm oil was not in compliance with the national law and regulations.
- Illegal deforestation is even more pervasive for soy—some 93% of the crop, mostly used to feed cattle and other livestock, is grown on illegally cleared lands.
- Also illicit are cocoa at 93%; cattle products, including beef, at 81%; and leather at 87%.
- The authors caution that the impact of additional commodities, such as coffee and maize, is on the rise.

## **Solutions in Scope**

Progress on ending deforestation has been slow despite pledges by governments and businesses—including the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), the UN Sustainable Goals and the Consumer Goods Forum—to halve or even eliminate deforestation by 2020. “It’s becoming increasingly clear that voluntary commitments are not enough by themselves and must be met by strong regulations—with sharp teeth,” said Blundell.

Democratic Senator Brian Schatz of Hawaii and Representative Earl Blumenauer of Oregon have announced plans to introduce a bill that would prohibit U.S. imports of agricultural commodities produced on illegally deforested land. The approach is modeled on the successful Lacey Act Amendments of 2008 that banned the trade in illegal timber. The European Union and the U.K. are also developing trade regulations designed to reduce commodity-driven deforestation.

“I think most U.S. consumers would strongly agree that it’s immoral, outdated, and preposterous that products sold on supermarket shelves can be traced back to illegally deforested land,” said Representative Earl Blumenauer. “This report offers more evidence as to why we need to crack down on illegal deforestation from commercial agriculture. We’ve made progress on illegally harvested timber under the Lacey Act. Now, putting an end to unnecessary illegal deforestation for palm oil, soy, beef, and other products is the next logical extension towards ending these destructive practices that are hurting the world’s forests and the climate.”

The upcoming climate talks in Glasgow mark another key moment for addressing illegal deforestation at the national and international scales. National climate plans and emissions targets are expected to include forest protection, considered to be one of the lowest-cost and most effective Nature-Based Solutions. Without such a solution, meeting the Paris targets and reversing the climate crisis are all but impossible.

But such solutions surely are possible. Case studies point to how forest destruction has been halted in the past. A growing body of research has shown that Indigenous Peoples are effective stewards of tropical forests who can serve as partners in ending illegal deforestation. And a decade ago, the Brazilian government did more than any other country to address climate change when it slowed deforestation by upping enforcement and working with soy and cattle producers to adopt a moratorium on forest clearing.