



For release: Tuesday 1 June

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As UN Climate talks resume, protecting natural forests and peatlands and enforcing safeguards must be top priorities

BONN, Germany – As talks resume here today toward a new global deal to prevent catastrophic climate change, negotiators will be seeking a way forward on the challenge of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD).

Stemming the tide of forest loss is a key link in the global effort against climate change. Forest destruction and degradation including loss of peatforest soils account for up to 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Establishing a strong agreement to halt that destruction — and mobilizing the funds to implement it — could help protect forests and peatlands, forest-dependent peoples, and the planet as a whole. But a flawed REDD agreement could threaten all three — jeopardizing intact forests and the rights of forest communities while creating loopholes that undermine real greenhouse gas reductions.

Hopes for a comprehensive and effective agreement on climate change were dashed in the final days of the Copenhagen talks last December. Parties made steady progress on a draft agreement for REDD, but it could not be finalized before the broader negotiations broke down. That draft included safeguards to ensure respect for the rights of indigenous peoples, prevent conversion of natural forests to plantations, protect biodiversity and ecosystems, and improve forest governance, but left pivotal questions unanswered. Resolving the issues that remain on REDD — including the crucial issues of monitoring and implementing the safeguards — will be critical to the success of the next climate summit in Cancun, Mexico this November.

“The question Parties must answer here is whether REDD is intended to protect the planet or protect business as usual. The safeguards are only safeguards if they are actually implemented, monitored and enforced. Without that, they’re no more than a paper tiger,” said Dr. Rosalind Reeve of Global Witness.

The Parties must also address other outstanding REDD issues, including:

- Setting a clear and ambitious global goal to halt emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries by 2030, with reductions of at least 50% by 2020;
- Setting funding priorities to ensure that REDD funds go first to protecting intact natural forests, avoiding drainage of peat soils, and improving forest governance, rather than to funding plantations and business as usual logging under the veil of “Sustainable Management of Forests”;
- Establishing “national” baselines for forest status and trends, and rejecting calls for “sub-national” forest accounting whereby countries receive REDD funds for avoiding deforestation/forest degradation in one region while continuing to log in another.
- Establishing a long-term REDD financing mechanism that clarifies how financial support will be mobilized, which countries will be eligible to receive funding, and whether longer term finance will be provided by funds, the market, or a combination of both.

Several recent processes, including the “REDD+ Partnership” agreement launched at last Thursday’s Oslo Climate and Forest Conference, have ramped up efforts to mobilize and coordinate funds from developed countries for REDD implementation. Apprehension is high among civil society campaigners that these schemes may become operative before strict guidelines on implementing and monitoring safeguards have been approved.

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“The draft REDD text contains critical provisions to protect the rights of indigenous peoples, protect biodiversity, and build effective forest governance structures. It is vital to ensure that in the process of fast tracking REDD, implementing and monitoring the safeguards, along with ensuring protection of natural forests, are made the top priorities for funding,” said Nils Hermann Ranum of Rainforest Foundation Norway.

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The Ecosystems Climate Alliance (www.ecosystemsclimate.org) is an alliance of NGOs committed to keeping natural terrestrial ecosystems intact and their carbon out of the atmosphere. We work to ensure this is done in a way which is equitable, transparent, consistent with the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and which takes place alongside deep and urgent cuts in fossil fuel emissions. ECA comprises Australian Orangutan Project, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), Global Witness, Humane Society International, Nepenthes, Rainforest Action Network, Rainforest Foundation Norway, The Rainforest Foundation U.K., Wetlands International, and The Wilderness Society.