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Proposed changes to Liberian forest laws would open way for devastating logging and slash government revenues, warns Global Witness

Changes to Liberia's forestry law proposed by the Liberian Timber Association (1) would dramatically reduce revenue for the state and are not in the best interests of the country, warned campaign group Global Witness today.

Global Witness has received a list of amendments that Liberian logging companies would like to see made to the country's forestry law. Among them are proposals to cut their rate of tax and a proposal to reinstate concessions that were cancelled following the civil war.

"Liberia's forestry reform started with the recognition that the timber industry fuelled Liberia's civil conflict. It would be an awful regression if companies linked to the conflict were allowed to start operating again," said Jonathan Gant, a Campaigner at Global Witness. "Lowering the bar for Liberia's logging companies, including reducing their taxes, is not the way to fulfill the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy."

The Timber Association's suggested amendments follow on the heels of recent damaging changes made to Liberia's forestry concession model under the recently-passed Community Rights Law (CRL).

According to the CRL, the size of a concession that can be clear cut has increased 10 fold - from 5,000 to 49,999 hectares, or over 190 square miles. This will devastate the country's forests and the people living in them. Companies will not have to bid for the award of a contract, which means they will bypass the most basic of performance tests.

Logging concessions of the sort envisaged by the new CRL undermine donor and government efforts to reform the sector. Liberia's forest reform process was lauded as an example of international best practice. However, the country's reforms will be undermined if concessions that cover immense sections of the forest are awarded without competitive bidding or meaningful environmental protections.

"There needs to be a serious rethink. The Liberian Government, together with local and international stakeholders, should ensure that the CRL does not damage the country's communities and its forests, or reduce the government's revenues. Such a rethink is the only way to make sure that Liberia's forestry laws continue to benefit Liberia," says Gant.

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(1) The Liberian Timber Association is a trade association representing some of the country's logging companies.