



Press Conference: Going Backward or Forward on Forests and Climate?

The following statements were prepared in advance of the joint Ecosystems Climate Alliance press conference, held at the UNFCCC meeting in Bonn on June 11, 2009. Actual delivery may have varied slightly from the spoken text.

Statement of Sean Cadman, the Wilderness Society, Australia

In 1992, the Kyoto Protocol was almost derailed by controversy over land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF), the segment of the Kyoto Protocol dealing with emissions and carbon storage from agriculture and forestry in the developed countries. From what we've seen in negotiations leading up to this point, Annex One countries, particularly the EU, have been more focused on gaming the system than seriously addressing the enormous emissions that stem from land use change and forestry in their countries.

The primary purpose of the Kyoto Protocol, of which LULUCF is a part, is to create a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in all six sectors included in the treaty. Unfortunately, LULUCF has until now served as a loophole in the Protocol, allowing Annex One countries to discount the cost of their fossil fuel emissions. At this time in the negotiations, the resurgence of old patterns suggests that LULUCF will end up as a giant loophole in the final treaty product, essentially neutering the entire Protocol.

Although none of the Annex One countries have clean hands, the European Union bears a significant responsibility for the unfortunate direction these talks are currently headed. The EU has put on the table a set of proposals to allow countries to choose how they set a baseline reference level for accounting for forest management emissions and sinks.

The worst of these are designed to ensure that in almost all circumstances countries would not account for actual emissions; in other words they could continue to generate credits even while logging their forests up to the points where their forests were no longer sinks at all. This situation has been exacerbated by the recent European Biofuels Directive which determined that burning forests for energy is carbon-neutral. This is encouraging the creation of forest-burning power stations - and additional emissions that are not calculated at all under current LULUCF rules for some countries.

One of the most heartbreaking consequences is that old-growth forests could be cut and the biodiversity in those forests will disappear - yet those emissions would not be reflected in a country's accounting.

The rules matter greatly here, which is exactly why Annex One countries, while verbally agreeing that we need to be more comprehensive in our accounting, are trying to set rules that will allow them to escape the consequences of the emissions from this sector. Those consequences include overall targets that will be set against a crediting mechanism that don't actually reflect the emissions that the atmosphere is seeing.

If the rules for this sector are not set and understood before the target setting there will be absolutely no transparency in the target setting process itself. Consequences of that are that if you keep negotiating long enough on the rules, then there will be inadequate time for target negotiations.

If these issues are not sorted out by Copenhagen, there is a significant danger of creating a parallel negotiation track similar to the process in Kyoto that led to weak targets and allowed LULUCF to become a loophole.

Statement of Johannes Joosten, Professor, University of Griefswald, Germany

In the area where I live, everyone thinks that Germany is doing a lot for the climate because everywhere you look, you see windmills, alternative energy, or insulation programs for old buildings. But one thing that we are not looking at is how we are using land. Fully 90 percent of land in Europe is being used to produce food crops, wood or other land products (including beer!). From all greenhouse gas emissions caused by human activities in my federal state, 30 percent are caused by emissions from drained wetlands. That makes land use more important than everything happening in transportation, or in industry or in household heating.

To conduct all of these activities here in Europe, a lot of wetlands have been drained, including peatlands, which are high carbon soils. After drainage, they emit a lot of greenhouse gases and are very prone to fire. Peatland emissions are so high that when I fly for my work three times a year around the world, I emit less carbon than one hectare of drained wetland in my state. In Russia and Belarus, where I do my research, thousands of peatland fires happen every year – these fires cover the sky filling Moscow and St. Petersburg with smoke. In Belarus, these fires burn soils that still contain the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl accident spreading toxic material throughout Europe.

In the European Union, emissions like this are hundreds of megatons of carbon dioxide. That's why these negotiations in Bonn are working to take land use change into account. We're trying to get these emissions into the calculation, acknowledge them, and create a system so that countries are rewarded or punished for greenhouse gas emissions from land use in the same way that they are rewarded or punished for behavior with respect to greenhouse gas emissions from industry or traffic.

All kinds of proposals have been made, varying from countries who say that all these things must be included, to countries that want to pick and choose which ones to include. It's not clear yet where the balance will fall in the end. What is clear is that this has a substantial amount of impact on the world's climate. If we don't account for these things, we will be leaving a huge amount of carbon emissions uncounted.

Changing land use patterns is not that complicated. It's a low hanging fruit in the climate change discussions. Europe is reporting these emissions to the UNFCCC already, which shows that it can be done. But the reporting is not included in the Kyoto agreement and thus has no consequences. Bringing LULUCF into the Kyoto Protocol would make Europe accountable and would close what amounts to a loophole in the Kyoto Protocol.

Statement of Nikki Reisch, Rainforest Foundation UK

Unfortunately, from what we've seen this week – the REDD negotiations seem to have lost their way. Negotiations about forests have become centered around so-called sustainable logging and plantations, losing sight of the central notion that we must prevent deforestation and forest degradation.

Rather than tackling the real challenge of incentivizing good forest governance and ensuring sound monitoring systems, negotiations have been distracted by financing issues & industry interests.

Industry is positioning itself to get carbon subsidies for logging activities. We have seen shifts in the language and focus around REDD from tackling deforestation to growing forests; from avoiding degradation to “managing forests.” REDD is now about so-called “sustainable logging” and plantations, no longer about keeping the world's natural forests standing.

Industrial logging IS forest degradation. Cutting down trees on an industrial scale is not a climate friendly activity. Neither is converting forests to plantations.

The aim must not be to set up a system that satisfies the demands of industry nor responds to the desires of developed countries for cheap offsets. The aim should be setting up systems that will work on the ground to protect forests and people.

On that front, we have seen some progress... there is growing recognition of the need to involve indigenous peoples and local communities in REDD, but still no consensus yet on recognizing and respecting their rights.

There are a number encouraging proposals on the table – for example Norway Tuvalu and the African Group – but we've yet to see agreement on those.

There have been some important openings on monitoring more than carbon – in particular on governance and the need for independent review. They are small openings but ones that can be emphasized in the coming months to produce a stronger treaty.

Stopping deforestation and degradation is not a purely technical or financial challenge as it is so often portrayed to be here. It is ultimately about forest governance and measuring far more than just emissions. Too much emphasis remains on counting carbon and selling it. And we have seen this week in Papua New Guinea what happens when countries rush to put their forest carbon on the market, without any clarity on the ground about what is actually going on in the forest, who owns the forest, and how this market is regulated.

Any final REDD agreement must incentivize good governance, secure rights and require strong safeguards to prevent perverse outcomes. If these key elements are neglected, not only are we likely to see a frenzy by developed countries to buy up cheap and insecure carbon offsets, which will fail forests and the climate, we are likely to see increased logging, plantations and widespread social conflict.

Statement of Lafcadio Cortesi, Rainforest Action Network

I recently returned from a five week trip to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, where I spent 5 weeks touring villages whose lives and livelihoods are being transformed by logging for pulp and paper companies and the rapid expansion of palm oil.

On the four-hour drive from Pekanbaru to the Kampar Peninsula in Sumatra's Riau Province, all I saw was one continuous oil palm plantation. This same land was intact tropical forest when I was a volunteer in Indonesia in the mid-1980's. I was accompanied by Pak Mursit, a village head from a nearby community, which had been logged and converted to oil palm from natural forest without the consent of his community. He told me how his community has actively opposed the conversion of their traditional lands to oil palm and been ignored by the companies and the government.

This illustrates some of key underlying drivers of deforestation in Indonesia, which has the highest rate of deforestation in the world, namely the lack of acknowledgement of local land rights as well as the lack of clarity and some times the corruption around granting licenses to companies to log and plant agricultural crops like palm oil and acacia trees for pulp and paper production.

The government of Indonesia has plans to convert another 20 to 30 million hectares of natural forest to plantations without the free, prior and informed consent of local communities. That's an area roughly the size of [France].

We were traveling to the Kampar Peninsula to talk to traditional leaders and community members in one of the largest remaining natural forests and perhaps the largest remaining peat dome in Riau Province, and home to almost a fifth of the province's estimated 400 remaining Sumatran tigers. We wanted to talk to communities about the existing plans to convert their traditional territories from forests to pulp and paper plantations. We wanted to learn how much they knew about these plans, if they supported them and what they knew about the negotiations to reduce deforestation and degradation at the international level – the negotiations being conducted today.

What we found was that the communities knew almost nothing about the plans that were being developed by companies and government to radically alter their land, razing the forests that they've always relied on and replacing them with tree plantations that will not sustain their traditional livelihoods.

What's being discussed at the REDD negotiations could not only sanction this type of business as usual but subsidize it with international contributions if the right type of safeguards are not put in place. Without recognition and international support to ensure that indigenous and community rights are respected, and without science-based forest definitions in the final REDD treaty, the communities and forests I visited last month could be entirely erased by the time that my 13 old daughter graduates from college, replacing one of the world's most incredible reservoirs of carbon and biodiversity with a desert of monocrop plantations, and destroying cultures that exist no where else on earth.