

Group: Wal-Mart blind to illegal logging

By MARCUS KABEL

Is there a toy tiger in your baby's crib? If that crib came from Wal-Mart, an environmental group says the wood it's made from could be endangering real Siberian tigers.

The Environmental Investigation Agency, a nonprofit group based in Washington D.C., said Wednesday that it found Chinese makers of Wal-Mart's wood products, including cribs, are using timber from a Russian region rife with illegal logging of protected forests.

The EIA said Wal-Mart is not pressing manufacturers to show where their wood comes from.

The group said that goes against Wal-Mart's public commitment to move toward using only wood harvested in environmentally friendly ways. The commitment is part of a broad environmental push by the world's largest retailer.

The EIA said destructive logging is a global issue but singled out Wal-Mart as the largest U.S. importer of wood products and for the power the retailer wields to pressure suppliers to go greener.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. "is turning a blind eye to illegal timber sources in its supply chain which threatens some of the world's last great forests", the EIA said.

Bentonville, Ark.-based Wal-Mart said it is encouraging its suppliers to use "sustainable and ethical sources".

"Sustainable wood sourcing is important to our business and our customers," Wal-Mart spokeswoman Tara Raddohl said.

Wal-Mart Chief Executive Lee Scott launched a major environmental push two years ago to cut energy use and solid waste, sell more environmentally friendly products and motivate its roughly 60,000 suppliers to follow suit.

As part of that, an internal working group on wood and paper products produced guidelines aimed at moving suppliers to using only sustainably harvested wood by 2010 and giving preference now to those who already do so.

"It is the intention of Wal-Mart and Sam's Club to sell only wood fiber products that come from legally logged sources," the wood policy group said in a March update on its work, without providing a specific deadline.

In September, Wal-Mart said it would stop selling Louisiana cypress mulch over concerns that the loss of cypress forests was endangering coast lands.

The EIA said its investigators, who have received awards for other work from the United Nations and the EPA, found evidence that much of the wood used by Chinese manufacturers comes from the Russian Far East, where experts estimate 35 percent to 50 percent of logging is illegal.

That region's vast forests are home to most of an estimated 510 remaining Amur tigers, the largest cat in the world and commonly called the Siberian tiger, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

WWF regional program director Dr. Darron Collins said illegal logging that tears up forests is a serious threat to the tigers, despite recent efforts by Russian authorities to toughen controls on timber harvesting.

"Logging and tigers can coexist. But illegal logging makes it harder on those who are trying to do it in a sustainable way," Collins told The Associated Press.

EIA investigators followed the wood trade between Russia and China back to the Chinese manufacturers of products sold at Wal-Mart.

The EIA said its staff, posing as buyers, was told by Chinese manufacturers that they buy wood from wholesalers who in turn are supplied from the Russian Far East.

The EIA said that supply chain translates into a significant risk that Chinese-made wood products on Wal-Mart shelves are made from illegally logged Russian trees.

The group said manufacturers told its undercover staff that Wal-Mart's buyers never asked about the origin of the wood.

Products examined by the EIA included cribs sold at Wal-Mart under the label of Simplicity Inc., based in Reading, Pa. The EIA said the manufacturer said they dealt directly with Wal-Mart buyers, even though they were producing for Simplicity.

Simplicity said it checks its supply chain to make sure wood comes from legal sources. "If presented with evidence of any wrongdoing at any point in our supply chain, Simplicity will immediately and thoroughly investigate such matters," it said in a statement.

Shares of Wal-Mart fell 58 cents, or 1.2 percent, to \$48.23 Wednesday.

On the Net:

Environmental Investigation Agency: <http://www.eia-global.org>

Wal-Mart Stores Inc.: <http://www.walmartfacts.com>

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