

Lawmakers Oppose Illegal Timber Trade

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- It could be your new hardwood floor or coffee table, with a rich mahogany hue.

While the wood may look good, there is a strong chance it came from timber harvested illegally in places such as Honduras, Indonesia or Peru, labor and environmental groups say.

Now some lawmakers want to crack down on illegal logging around the world. Led by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., the group is seeking support for a bill to ban U.S. imports of wood products derived from illegally harvested timber.

Much like the movie "Blood Diamond," which portrays diamonds as fueling a brutal civil war in West Africa, lawmakers hope to make U.S. consumers more aware of where their new bedroom dresser or hardwood floor comes from.

"Illegal logging is a problem that crosses national boundaries to affect communities, companies and ecosystems alike," Blumenauer said.

As much as 30 percent of U.S. hardwood imports are from suspicious or illegal sources, according to the U.S. [International Trade Commission](#). Much of the wood is sent to China, where it is processed at low cost and then exported to the United States and other countries.

Illegal logging costs U.S. companies as much as \$1 billion a year in lost exports and reduced prices for timber products, according to the American Forest and Paper Association, a trade group that represents the wood products industry.

"I can't stress enough how pervasive this problem is," Blumenauer said at a Capitol news conference Tuesday. "It's destabilizing the environment, destabilizing trade opportunities and literally robbing national governments" of millions of dollars in lost taxes.

The logging bill, co-sponsored by Reps. Robert Wexler, D-Fla., and Jerry Weller, R-Ill., would extend the Lacey Act -- which prohibits importation of wildlife taken in violation of conservation

laws -- to apply to wood and timber products. The measure would ban the import, export or sale of timber products made in violation of domestic or foreign law or international treaty.

The forest and paper association stopped short of endorsing the bill, but said it welcomes Congress' increased interest in the issue.

Earlier this month, Senate Finance Committee Chairman [Max Baucus](#), D-Mont., asked the International Trade Commission to investigate Chinese trade practices he said are hurting U.S. hardwood plywood manufacturers. Last month, the U.S. Trade Representative filed a complaint with [World Trade Organization](#) targeting Chinese subsidies of illegally harvested hardwood.

The Environmental Investigation Agency, an advocacy group, conducted undercover investigations in several countries to learn the extent of illegal logging. A man in Singapore told the group that timber smuggling is more lucrative than drug smuggling.

"Profits are high and there's no risk of being caught," he said, according to Alexander von Bismarck, campaign director for the environmental group.

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On the Net:

American Forest & Paper Association: <http://www.afandpa.org>

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

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