

Congress Combats Illegal Logging in Peru, Panama

WASHINGTON, DC, May 14, 2007 (ENS) - Members of Congress and the Bush administration reached agreement late last week on labor and environmental provisions to be incorporated in trade agreements with Peru and Panama. The deal includes measures to address the imports of illegally logged timber from Peru's Amazon rainforest.

Experts with environmental groups working on logging issues say that these measures could signal a new zero-tolerance policy from Congress towards the illegal timber trade.

"These timber measures make an important statement that free trade should not mean illegal trade," said Kris Genovese, associate international counsel with Defenders of Wildlife.

Defenders of Wildlife, the Natural Resources Defense Council, NRDC, and the Environmental Investigation Agency, EIA, among others, have worked for years to stop illegal logging and trade in illegally cut timber because of the damage it does to rainforests and local communities.

The groups say that illegal logging has been particularly pervasive in the remote Amazon areas of Peru, and is driven by demand from the United States.

In addition to requiring stronger protections against illegal logging in Peru, Congressional negotiators insisted on measures that would give greater control to the U.S. Customs Service to stop illegal cedar and mahogany at the U.S. border. Peruvian cedar and mahogany are in great demand in the United States.

"These provisions set a real precedent for addressing illegal logging through our trade agreements," said Allan Thornton, president of EIA.

Congress also is currently considering the Legal Timber Protection Act, H.R. 1497, a bill recently introduced in the House that would make it illegal to import timber into the United States that was logged illegally in any foreign country.

"We are pleased to see this strong leadership from the Ways and Means Committee on the illegal timber trade, and urge Congress to remain vigilant to ensure that the trade provisions are fully implemented and enforced," said Ari Hershowitz, director of the Latin American BioGems campaign for NRDC.