
Timber industry, enviros unite to promote bill combating illegal logging

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A major timber industry group has joined with environmentalists and labor unions to support new legislation that would toughen enforcement against those who sell and import illegally harvested timber from forests around the world.

Senate Forests Subcommittee Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) is set to introduce the bill today, which would ban the import, export or sale of timber illegally sold in violation of a foreign or domestic law or international environmental treaty. The measure would apply the Lacey Act, a 1900 law prohibiting trade in illegally taken fish and wildlife, to plants.

Unlike previous efforts to revise the Lacey Act, the American Forest & Paper Association supports the Wyden bill, along with the Environmental Investigation Agency, National Hardwood Lumber Association, Hardwood Federation, International Brotherhood of Teamsters and environmental groups.

To comply with the Lacey Act, companies would have to demonstrate they "took due care" to ensure they are not using illegal timber. Timber and wood-product companies who use certified sustainable practices could benefit because they would be easily able to ensure the public and federal government they are using wood from legitimate sources, although the bill would not require certification.

"Too often we find in our investigations that the American consumer is the unwitting accomplice to violent criminal networks that are plundering the world's forests," said Alexander von Bismarck of the Environmental Investigation Agency, an advocacy group. "This bill will, for the first time, make the U.S. market part of the solution instead of a leading cause of the illegal logging problem."

Wyden's bill is similar to legislation, H.R. 1497, that Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) introduced earlier this year. But Wyden made two changes to secure the support of the timber industry, which had expressed concerns the House bill would place new burdens on U.S. companies.

The Senate bill includes specific descriptions of the underlying violations of the Lacey Act, such as harvesting a tree from a national park or nonpayment of stumpage fees. And a second change clarifies the documentation timber importers need to ensure compliance rather than leave that question to an unspecified regulatory process.

Correcting 'imbalances'

U.S. timber companies are increasingly losing market share due to depressed prices and loss of export markets, partially due to illegal harvests.

"Our member companies take pride in sustainable forestry and environmental stewardship," said AF&PA President Donna Harmon. "When illegally harvested timber enters the U.S., it nullifies those efforts, and it deprives developing countries from important economic gains. This legislation will start to correct those imbalances."

The bill would also require a study in two years to determine how the law is being implemented and make further recommendations.

Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, connected the illegal logging issue to climate change because deforestation causes about 3 percent of the total carbon dioxide emissions annually.

"While some of it is the result of legal logging, most is caused by either illegal forest clearing to convert rainforest into livestock pasture, or for the illegal logging trade," Pope wrote on his *Huffington Post* blog yesterday, noting 83 percent of the mahogany logged from Peru is cut illegally.