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## Activists fear U.S. pact will fuel Asia logging

Free trade deal with Malaysia will encourage illegal cuts, they argue

[Reuters](#)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia - A free-trade pact between the United States and Malaysia could encourage more illegal logging and accelerate rainforest destruction in Southeast Asia, an international environmental group said on Thursday.

The Environmental Investigation Agency said Malaysian timber exports included wood cut illegally from the vast but threatened rainforests of neighboring Indonesia and warned that U.S. demand for these exports could surge under a free-trade arrangement.

"With no current means of preventing illegally sourced wood products from entering our markets, it is irresponsible for the U.S. to continue to push for free trade with nations that play prominent roles in the illegal timber trade," said the report, written by the group's U.S.-based activists.

"This policy will only continue to destroy forests and livelihoods abroad while harming the timber industry at home."

Malaysia, which is Washington's 10th-largest trading partner, is in talks to negotiate a free-trade pact with the United States by year-end. It exported around 3.7 million cubic meters of sawn timber last year, up 16 percent from 2004, government data show.

The Environmental Investigation Agency, which says its mission is to probe and expose environmental crime, and other green groups have said that more than a third of Malaysian timber exports come from illegal logs, mostly from Indonesia.

The report said the United States had so far failed in its trade dealings in the region to insist on proper safeguards against illegally logged timber and called for any new free-trade deals to include tougher bilateral enforcement of the illegal trade.

U.S. and Malaysian officials have barely mentioned environmental issues in their public comments on the talks, which began in Malaysia on Monday.

But local industry and green groups said on Thursday that the issue appeared to be on the agenda as U.S. officials involved in the talks had visited them this week to discuss the matter. The U.S. officials could not be reached for comment.

The Malaysian Timber Council said environmental groups had greatly exaggerated the scale of the problem but acknowledged some logs were smuggled into Malaysia and that this was difficult to stop.

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