

U.S. lawmakers bid to keep out ill-gotten timber

By Missy Ryan

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers on Tuesday pushed for new rules to stop American companies from buying illegally logged timber plundered from fragile forests around the world.

Illegal logging is not only a death knell for forest preserves and rich ecosystems, according to Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat, but it also cost the U.S. timber industry \$1 billion a year in lost sales.

Up to 30 percent of hardwood lumber and plywood traded around the world may now come from world forest preserves or other fragile areas in the Peruvian Amazon or Indonesia, Blumenauer and other lawmakers say.

"There's a ripple effect. It's not just that it costs jobs .. but this is undermining indigenous cultures in other parts of the world," he said in an interview.

Blumenauer, along with Florida Democrat Robert Wexler and Illinois Republican Jerry Weller, see the plan as a chance to expand existing federal prohibitions that already exist on illegally gotten wildlife or plants.

The three lawmakers are supported by green groups such as the Environmental Investigation Agency and the Sierra Club.

Those groups say illegal logging builds up global warming gases, decreases biodiversity, and depletes safe drinking water. They also say it tramples the rights of indigenous people, spurs corruption in poor nation's governments, and gives rise to dangerous timber cartels.

Often, developing countries turn illegally logged wood into products like flooring, pool cues, and luxury doors that end up in U.S. homes, Alexander von Bismarck, campaign director at the Environmental Investigation Agency, told reporters at a news conference to launch the bill. He said China's government is especially lax about the problem.

BILL WOULD ENABLE PROSECUTION

Blumenauer's bill would ban the import, export, possession, purchase or sale of illegally harvested timber.

That might restore what lawmakers estimate as a \$460 million annual hit to U.S. firms in lost exports. They also believe the trade brings down the value of U.S. exports by \$500 million to \$700 million a year, which takes a special toll on timber states like Blumenauer's Oregon.

Bill sponsors say the change won't burden the agencies that now implement the rules on wildlife and plants, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, Customs and Border Protection, and the Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

But Blumenauer acknowledged the move would likely push up timber prices for U.S. consumers.

That might make it tough to pass Capitol Hill. Right now, it's unclear how much support the bill has now in Congress or if the White House will actively oppose it.

Brent McClendon, vice president of the International Wood Products Association, which represents importers, said the United States is already doing a great deal to combat illegal logging, pointing at a cooperation deal signed last year which gave Indonesia \$1 million to guard against illegal logging.

He said Blumenauer's bill wouldn't do much to get at entrenched problems in faraway countries, while it could expose U.S. companies to big costs, property seizures or worse.

U.S. lumber imports were \$22.5 billion in 2006. The lion's share of that was from Canada, McClendon said.

