



THE FORESTS DIALOGUE

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Understanding 'Deforestation-Free'

TFD Initiative Concept Note

Background

More than 20 years after the Earth Summit drew the world's attention to the problem of deforestation, global forests continue to shrink. International mechanisms to protect forests—including commodity certification, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), and timber legality verification—have left their marks, contributing to a slowing of the global deforestation rate. But the UN cautions that the current rate “is still alarmingly high in many parts of the world.”¹ Many observers have concluded that a new approach is needed to protect the forests that remain.

A novel policy instrument, heralded as potentially game-changing, has emerged in the past few years. Over 50 companies—including some of the world's largest consumer goods, retail, food, and commodity giants—and 70 governments have committed to eradicate deforestation respectively from their supply chains and jurisdictions. Multi-stakeholder groups such as the Consumer Goods Forum, the Banking Environment Initiative, and the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 have pledged their support for a target of zero net deforestation by 2020. NGOs and investors have coalesced around supporting the development and implementation of deforestation-free commitments. Whereas the earlier generation of anti-deforestation efforts uses market-based incentives or trade restrictions to effect a reduction in forest loss, the recent deforestation-free commitments impose a results-based target of zero deforestation.

The Challenge

The deforestation-free movement has grown quickly, and its 'zero' approach has already attained a measure of international legitimacy. The New York Declaration on Forests, announced in October 2014, represents the affirmation by 130 governments, companies, NGOs, and civil society groups of the need to bring deforestation to a complete halt.² While admirable in principle, deforestation-free commitments have followed one after the other so swiftly that there has been little opportunity to take stock of 'zero deforestation'—either the wisdom of the concept or the feasibility of the mechanism.

Fundamental questions still need to be answered if deforestation-free pledges are to significantly contribute to reducing global deforestation. Are such pledges a good idea in the first place? What is their scope, and should the scope vary depending on the landscape to which they apply? What is meant by 'forest' and how can progress toward protecting forests be monitored and verified? How should commitments interface with local forest-dependent communities, and how can smallholder access to global supply chains be maintained? Can and should deforestation-free commitments be integrated with other mechanisms for conserving forests? (Refer to Annex 1 for a fuller list of key questions.)

Lacking widely agreed upon answers to these questions, the deforestation-free “space” has grown rife with uncertainty. This has delayed implementation of deforestation-free policies, frustrated efforts to measure progress toward achieving targets, and hindered the ability of stakeholders to hold actors accountable to their pledges. Moreover, uncertainty may be inhibiting new actors from endorsing 'zero' targets of their own.

Way Forward

The Forests Dialogue (TFD), representing a coalition of actors from the private sector, government, multilateral organizations, NGOs, and civil society, has undertaken the Understanding ‘Deforestation-Free’ Initiative to build consensus around key definitions, best practices, and ways forward to implement and scale up deforestation-free policies. A scoping dialogue was held in October 2014, in which experts representing 35 key forest sector stakeholder groups identified contentious issues whose resolution would lend clarity to the deforestation-free space (see <http://theforestdialogue.org/dialogue/scoping-dialogue-understanding-deforestation-free-udf>). TFD will build on this foundation by holding field dialogues in Indonesia (March 2015), Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, or Peru, June/July 2015), and Africa (Gabon, Mozambique, or South Africa, September/October 2015). These field dialogues will apply the questions identified during the scoping process to particular geographies, drawing on the knowledge of local stakeholders to inform the development of robust, place-based solutions. To this end, field dialogues will involve approximately 30 practitioners from the host country and 20 international issue leaders. The Initiative will conclude with a synthesis dialogue held in Europe (December 2015), during which participants will reflect on the learnings from the field dialogues and formulate guidelines/best practices for developing and implementing effective and impactful deforestation-free policies. TFD will work with its partners and all dialogue participants throughout and following the dialogue process to embed these outputs into their deforestation-free advocacy, policymaking, and implementation activities.

TFD aims to include diverse stakeholders in the upcoming dialogues, all of whom have a stake in ensuring fair, efficient, and effective approaches to achieving deforestation-free outcomes. Companies and governments have an interest in clearing up the ambiguities surrounding deforestation-free commitments so that they may avoid criticism for failing to meet goals that they never intended to set. Further, widely agreed upon standards for developing and implementing deforestation-free pledges would benefit pledge-makers in a number of ways. They would ensure the approval of NGOs and other advocacy groups for pledges that conform to the standards, ease the burden on pledge-makers to initially formulate these policies, and level the competitive playing field by pressuring laggards to announce their own commitments. Meanwhile, NGOs, civil society organizations, and inter-governmental organizations stand to benefit from the opportunity to influence the design and implementation of deforestation-free policies, and from a degree of standardization across deforestation-free efforts that would facilitate easier monitoring.

Why TFD?

TFD has deep convening capacity and a proven track record of bringing together diverse forest sector stakeholders to discuss contentious policy issues in a neutral setting. The unique multi-stakeholder dialogue process that TFD employs affords a powerful tool for building consensus among actors with divergent interests and who may have frequently clashed in the past. TFD has much experience to bring to the particular issue of ‘deforestation-free’ due to its past and current initiatives on Forest Certification, Illegal Logging, REDD+, the 4Fs, and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

References

¹ UN Food and Agriculture Organization (2014), State of the World’s Forests 2014 www.fao.org/3/a-i3710e/i3710e02.pdf, 2.

² “New York Declaration on Forests: Action Statements and Action Plans,” Sept. 23, 2014. www.un.org/climatechange/summit/action-areas/.

Annex 1: Fracture Lines

Understanding and/or resolving the following 'issues of conflict' between key stakeholders will move the whole sector toward reaching the collective target of reducing deforestation:

- ➔ Are deforestation-free commitments a good idea to begin with?
 - Which is more effective, a nuanced notion of reduced deforestation or a strict notion of deforestation-free?
 - Does the focus on deforestation-free take critical attention away from the problem of forest degradation, or from initiatives that promote more than simply preserving forest cover, such as illegal logging efforts, forest certification, and sustainable forest management?
 - Are forests best protected through a single-issue focus on deforestation or by improving landscape-level management?
 - Does the deforestation-free approach simply create space for bad actors to continue operating while good ones withdraw from risky places?
 - Are deforestation drivers other than the global commodity trade more significant, in which case a deforestation-free approach that focuses on multinational corporate commitments might be missing the point?
- ➔ Can deforestation-free commitments work for actors who serve only domestic markets?
 - How are deforestation-free approaches perceived by diverse stakeholder groups?
- ➔ What do the various versions of deforestation-free commitments mean exactly?
 - Deforestation-free
 - No deforestation
 - Zero deforestation
 - Zero net deforestation
 - Zero gross deforestation
 - Zero illegal deforestation
- ➔ What should the scope of deforestation-free commitments be?
 - Are there particular contexts in which a zero gross deforestation, zero net deforestation, or zero illegal deforestation commitment is most appropriate?
 - Under deforestation-free policies, should no deforestation be permitted whatsoever, or should only 'unacceptable' deforestation be prohibited?
 - Should there be different deforestation-free approaches for landscapes/regions that have high forest cover (e.g., >80%) compared to low forest cover?
 - How should 'deforestation-free' relate to national laws and policies (e.g., permits that allow land conversion, or zoned development corridors in which conversion is encouraged)?
- ➔ How should deforestation-free commitments interface with local forest-dependent communities?
 - How should these commitments accommodate local peoples' rights, livelihoods, and aspirations with respect to the forests to which they claim rights?
 - How can, and should, deforestation-free policies be implemented in areas that lack clear tenure and tenure security?

- Are the methods which have been adopted thus far to incorporate concern for local rights and interests into these commitments sufficient?
- ➔ What can be done to ensure that smallholders are not excluded from global supply chains by deforestation-free policies?
 - Is group certification possible?
- ➔ How should baselines (after which conversion is deemed 'deforestation' for purposes of deforestation-free commitments) be treated?
 - Should a particular date be put forward as an acceptable baseline?
 - What can an historical deforester do to conform to deforestation-free standards?
- ➔ What counts as a 'forest' when verifying progress toward meeting deforestation-free commitments?
 - Should conversion of forests into managed planted forests be considered deforestation?
 - Is the HCS approach developed by GAR, Greenpeace, and TFT, which focuses exclusively on carbon and relies on statistical analyses and visual estimations, appropriate?
 - Can and should this HCS approach be applied beyond the tropical regions to which it has been applied thus far, or should locally-determined definitions of 'forest' be used?
 - If deforestation-free commitments indirectly cause forest conversion in other areas (e.g., by displacing farmers), should this conversion count against progress toward meeting the commitments?
- ➔ How should actions in furtherance of deforestation-free commitments be monitored and verified?
 - Are there ways for existing certification schemes such as those governed by the Forest Stewardship Council and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil to complement deforestation-free commitments or provide means to verify them?
 - Is there a way to ensure that small actors will be able to access verifications schemes and thus global markets?
 - How should grievances concerning actors who fail to meet their commitments be verified and addressed?
- ➔ Can and should corporate deforestation-free commitments be integrated with other forest conservation efforts such as certification, landscape-level planning, REDD+, and national deforestation-free pledges?
- ➔ Are initiatives to eradicate deforestation best framed negatively, as 'deforestation-free,' or in positive formulations such as 'sustainable landscape management'?