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PRESS RELEASE

Forest conservation organisation will hold one-day fast on St. Patrick's Day outside NEW Civic Offices in Mullingar.

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Local Authority fails to see the wood for the trees in new Civic Offices.

Just Forests a forest campaigning group will hold a one-day fast outside the new Civic offices in Mullingar in protest against the Council' s use of illegal plywood on St. Patrick's Day 17th March 2009.

A secret investigation by Offaly-based forest education group Just Forests has revealed that Chinese plywood – containing two species of endangered tropical hardwood – is currently being used in the construction of the new Civic Offices in Mullingar, Co Westmeath.
"This makes a mockery of Ireland's commitment to a number of international conventions most notably CITES (The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna & Flora), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) all of which are designed to meet our international obligations towards 'sustainable development' and poverty alleviation that Ireland has signed up to," according to Tom Roche, coordinator of Just Forests.

Westmeath Co Council, like most Local Authorities around Ireland, currently has no official policy concerning the responsible procurement of timber used in its own buildings, despite the fact that illegal-logging is causing widespread social, environmental, economic and ecological hardship for millions of people in developing countries.

"The use of such plywood in this case is also responsible for layoffs in the Irish Panelboard Industry," according to Mr Neil Foot, Managing Director of Waterford-based SmartPly Europe.

Tom Roche, from Just Forests, said: "By using endangered tropical hardwood in the construction of this building Westmeath Co Council is trashing some of the world's last remaining rainforests. It also makes a mockery of the Irish Government's claims to lead on the issue of climate change, as forest destruction is one of the main causes of global warming. The Council like all other Local Authorities in Ireland and the Government needs to introduce a tough new policy on this, or it risks further scandal and significant job losses."

Plywood samples taken from the Mullingar site were tested in Hamburg University and the results revealed that the species used in the cladding included bintangor and nyatoh (pencil cedar). Both these species are found in paradise forests of south East Asia, and often used in the manufacture of Chinese plywood- an issue which has been highlighted in recent years, as these species are often logged illegally and unsustainably. For instance the vast majority of bintangor comes from Papua New Guinea (PNG) where illegal and destructive logging is rampant. Logging companies in the area have been accused of widespread illegality including human rights abuses. Much of this bintangor is shipped to China where it is used in the manufacturer of cheap throw away plywood-such as the hoarding seen on numerous building sites around Ireland.

"A significant part of the timber trade involves a world market of stolen goods. The impacts of this illegal trade on valuable ecosystems, the world's poor, the economies of developing countries and climate change mean there is a moral imperative to address this problem in every possible way." (*House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee)*

The continued use of Chinese plywood in Irish construction makes a mockery of the Government's ability to meet their international obligations.

Chinese logging companies are also wreaking havoc in Tanzania's forests, where illegal logging is rampant. Tanzania is one of Irish Aid's priority countries for development assistance. A recent report by TRAFFIC and IUCN highlights the on-going destruction illegal-logging is having on community-managed forests in Tanzania. The report is available on Just Forests website at: www.justforests.org

"Government and companies can't continue to close their eyes and hope that the plywood and timber they purchase is from, legal and sustainable sources - ignorance is not a defence" said Tom Roche, who represents Offaly-based NGO Just Forests.

We have written to the Minister for the Environment Mr. John Gormley calling on the Government to adopt a responsible 'Timber Procurement Policy' that will help combat illegal and unsustainable extraction of timber from the world's forests. We were astonished that the Minister refuses to get involved in this issue, which blatantly contravenes government policy" said Tom Roche.

The Minister's reply to the letter by Just Forests was received on 24/02/09. In it, Minister Gormley stated that the Westmeath County Council case is a matter for the Department of Finance and that Local Authorities are independent bodies and "decisions regarding procurement are a matter for each individual local authority and the Department [Environment] does not have a role in this matter".

The group also wrote to Westmeath Co Council in June 2008 (Westmeath Examiner, July 5, 2008) bringing this matter to their attention and offering assistance/timber policy (free of charge) to help them source sustainably-produced timber, but got no reply from the Council.

"It's time our politicians and Local Authorities got serious about climate change, poverty eradication and job creation by supporting responsible timber traders/industries and lead by example. This can be done by supporting internationally recognised independent third party forest certification standards such as that of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)." Mr Roche said.

ENDS.

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Notes For The Editor.

International Commitments

The Irish Government has commitments to sustainability under a number of international conventions they have signed and includes: The Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Local Agenda 21 (LA21 from the Earth Summit) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Also of huge importance is the emerging EU Council (Proposed) Regulation on Illegal-Logging and the EU Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade guidelines (EU FLEGT) which Ireland will have to abide by.

The economics of forest loss.

According to an EU-commissioned study entitled *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity,* published in October 2008, stated that the annual cost of forest loss alone is 2-5 trillion US dollars alone.