Ireland failing to act on illegal logging

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The matter of the failure by Ireland to implement the EUTR was recently raised in the Irish Parliament, following work by ClientEarth and Irish development education NGO Just Forests.

Over the centuries, logging in Ireland had a profound impact on the people and the landscape. The island was once densely wooded and the forests supplied shelter, fuel and food to the population. Consequently, the importance of forests was heavily imprinted in the old Gaelic culture. This started to change in the Middle Ages as wood was cut down to make ways for new towns and to supply Britain's ship-building and other industries. An old Irish poem (*Caoine Cill Chaise/Lament for Kilcash*) records the negative social and environmental impacts of widespread logging in one area:

Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad, tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár; níl trácht ar Chill Chais ná a teaghlach, is ní bainfear a cling go bráth

What shall we do from now on without timber? The last of the woods is gone. No more of Kilcash and its household And its bells will not ring again.

Logging had a profound impact on Ireland. But widespread illegal logging today, particularly in tropical regions such as Amazonia, Central Africa and South Asia, is having a detrimental impact on forest communities and the environment.

The EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) is designed to address illegal logging by making it illegal to place on the EU market timber which is logged in contravention of the laws of the country of harvest. It is important that it is applied consistently across the EU.

As the Irish Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers drew to a close at the end of June, we drew attention to the fact that Ireland had failed to put in place the measures necessary to prevent illegally logged timber from being placed on the Irish market.

Despite the severe economic downturn, Ireland continues to consume a large per capita amount of timber and timber products. In 2011, €510,000,000 worth was imported, including 201,000 cubic meters of sawn timber and over 437,000 cubic meters of pulp and paper. From musical instruments to construction, Irish producers and consumers are at significant risk of buying illegal timber.

Ireland, together with the other EU Member States, is responsible for ensuring the EUTR is enforced and levying “effective, proportionate and dissuasive” penalties for law breakers. The Irish Government had over two years to put in place appropriate measures, including a body (known as a Competent Authority) to ensure effective implementation. It was required to notify the Commission by 3 June 2011 of the name and address of the relevant Competent Authority. These steps have not yet been taken.

As things stand, the EUTR is not being enforced in Ireland. This means illegal timber can continue to be placed on the Irish market without scrutiny. Continued non-compliance by Ireland and other

EU Member States could lead to a distortion in the EU timber market, undermining the efforts of legitimate timber businesses to comply with the law.

The matter of the failure by Ireland to implement the EUTR was recently raised in the Irish Parliament, following work by ClientEarth and Irish development education NGO Just Forests. The Irish Deputy Minister for Agriculture's response gave no clear indication of when Ireland might comply with the regulation. Junior Minister Hayes said "the process is at an early stage" to justify their lack of action thus far. This is not correct given the fact that the EUTR was enacted in late 2010. However, in any event, a Member State cannot rely on a perceived lack of action by others for its failure to comply with its legal obligations.

Consequently, the Irish government is not complying with its obligation to faithfully enforce EU law. This is all the more unacceptable given that Ireland has held the Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers for the past six months. Addressing illegal logging is also recognising that it is a contributing factor to the loss of forest ecosystems, and negatively impacts forest dependant peoples, their livelihoods and culture.

Ireland is not alone in failing to enforce the law thus far. We believe it is important to document non-compliance so measures can be taken to ensure a consistent approach across the EU. Where warranted, we will support the correct implementation of the EUTR so that it is properly applied, in order to address the issue of illegal timber on the EU market.

Photo credit: Just Forests - King Oak, Charleville Forest Estate, Tullamore, Co Offaly, Ireland

Tags: EUTR, Ireland, logging