

Palm oil round table 'a farce'

Greenpeace has branded the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) "a farce" following their failure to take action against members they say are destroying Indonesia's peat lands and forests.

By Ian Wood

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A draft resolution calling for an immediate moratorium on logging in areas of high value protected forests did not even make it on to the agenda.

Before their recent annual meeting in Bali there was hope that the new resolution would have forced members to cease logging in important areas of forest as determined by new digital maps.

"The rapid loss of forests in Indonesia and the current climate crisis needs strong leadership from the global business community," said Bustar Maitar, Greenpeace southeast Asia forest campaigner.



Tripa area of forest in North West Sumatra is home to the critically endangered Sumatran orang-utan Photo: IAN WOOD

"However the RSPO has failed dismally to take up the challenge.

"'Sustainable palm oil' continues to be a farce while RSPO stands exposed as a weak and ineffectual industry body."

The coalition of members that make up the RSPO include NGO's such as WWF and Oxfam along with both producers and major users of palm oil.

Unilever is one of the world's largest purchasers of palm oil and has been under pressure from Greenpeace not to deal with companies who are destroying critical areas of rainforest.

Unilever's sustainable agriculture director, Jan Kees Vis, is also president of the RSPO executive board. Unilever did recently pledge to purchase only sustainable palm oil by 2015 but the argument over how this is certified

continues.

Following pressure from Greenpeace, Unilever developed a draft resolution calling for a moratorium on logging in areas of high value forest that was due to be voted on in Bali last week.

However, to the dismay of many conservationists, the resolution was removed from the schedule of the RSPO meeting.

"If the RSPO had any integrity then it would have taken urgent action. For Greenpeace it is clear that the current RSPO standards are too weak, are not implemented and are clearly failing to address this rampant deforestation," said Tim Birch, Greenpeace international forest campaigner.

Recently a shipment labelled 'sustainable' palm oil arrived in Holland to coincide with the annual general meeting of the RSPO.

The 500 tons of palm oil was destined for Unilever and was cited as proof that sustainable palm oil was at last being produced.

However Greenpeace has produced a report which they say casts doubt on the company that produced the shipment.

It came originally from United Plantations who were the first palm oil producer to be RSPO-certified. Although the certification of United Plantations only applies to their Malaysian operations they are also under an obligation to ensure that their other interests meet certain minimum requirements.

This process, known as partial certification, was developed by environmental groups within the RSPO to ensure that companies could not attract buyers of sustainable palm oil from showcase plantations while destroying forests and peat lands elsewhere.

Greenpeace alleges that United Plantations and its subsidiaries are embroiled in a number of illegal non-compliant activities in Indonesia including deep peat forest conversion and land disputes with local community members.

United Plantations said the Greenpeace report was based on "misconceptions and misunderstandings".

In relation to the development of peat land they point out that RSPO criteria stipulates: "Planting on extensive areas of peat soils and other fragile soils should be avoided."

United Plantations claim that their estimated peat area in Kalimantan, Indonesia, amounts to 3,800 hectares which constitutes 11 per cent of their entire Indonesian land bank.

Of this total area of peat forest they say they have planted 604 hectares with palm oil which would fit in with the criteria of the RSPO.

Even with the advance of digital mapping and GPS systems the reality is that it is hard to monitor exactly what is happening in remote areas of Indonesia. Land ownership laws are confusing and often the palm oil companies have been granted their concessions by central Indonesian government.

United Plantations admit their properties contain a number of local communities who claim traditional land ownership and/or user rights. As part of the process in obtaining their operational permit they need to get the full consent of communities involved.

"This is arguably the most tedious and challenging part of land acquisition in Indonesia, because there is rarely consensus among villagers pertaining to trading of traditional land.

"Therefore land acquisition often necessitates negotiations directly with each family who owns a piece of land.

"It cannot be emphasised enough that villagers' approval are of utmost importance to the palm oil business. It takes merely one discontented villager to cause massive havoc in and around the estates," United Plantations said.

They claim that the specific case raised by Greenpeace pertaining to land conflicts involved the falsification of land ownership documents by a villager who they also claim assaulted an employee of United Plantations.

There is certainly a growing demand for sustainable palm oil as many users do not want to be associated with the destruction of rainforest and the threat to endangered species including the orang-utan.

United Plantations say their 500 ton shipment that recently arrived in Europe was a major milestone and that the allegations made by Greenpeace are "unfounded".

A resolution put forward by the Swiss NGO PanEco to force the RSPO to act to protect an area of peat forest swamp in Sumatra was narrowly approved.

The Tripa area of forest in North West Sumatra is home to one of just six remaining viable populations of the critically endangered Sumatran orang-utan and contains millions of tons of carbon dioxide that is being released into the atmosphere as it is destroyed.

The palm oil company PT Astra Agro Lestari are running one of the concessions in Tripa that has about 6,000 hectares of virgin forest located on peat swamp. This is a legal concession granted by Indonesian central government some time ago.

PT Astra Agro Lestari supply Unilever with palm oil and under the terms of this resolution the RSPO is forced to write to PT Astra Agro Lestari and members that have business relationships with them to explain their concern regarding their activities.

Because Unilever is such a key member of the RSPO it is hoped that this could help persuade PT Astra Agro Lestari to move its concession to more suitable land.

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