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## **ECOSYSTEMS CLIMATE ALLIANCE CALLS ON ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS TO OPPOSE MOVES BY INDONESIA AND THE EU TO DEFINE OIL PALM PLANTATIONS AS FORESTS**

Environment ministers from more than 100 countries meeting this week in Bali must oppose initiatives from Indonesia and the EU to reclassify oil palm plantations as forests<sup>(1)</sup>, said the Ecosystems Climate Alliance today. Reclassification would subvert global efforts to halt climate change and threaten biodiversity, warned ECA's forest and climate experts.

Redefining plantations as forests will create perverse incentives that actually finance deforestation by oil palm plantation companies. This is clearly contrary to current global efforts to protect forests by providing funds to assist countries and companies in reducing the degradation and destruction of forests and peatlands responsible for more than 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Civil society organizations in the EU and Indonesia have spoken out against these measures, with representatives of Indonesian-based Telapak stating that, "the concept of calling an oil plantation a forest has no basis in fact. It is merely a cover to help investors convert forests."

"Other nations engaged in REDD negotiations must make it clear to Indonesia that palm oil plantations are not forests," said Stephen Leonard of the Australian Orangutan Project. "The proposed Indonesian decree is totally unacceptable. It runs contrary to an effective and credible REDD mechanism and undermines countries with a genuine commitment to make REDD work."

The conversion of natural forests, whether to wood plantations or oil palm plantations, creates substantial greenhouse gas emissions, with up to 80% of carbon lost to the atmosphere depending on the type of forest ecosystem and the type of plantation which replaces it.

"Europe has proven itself a serial offender in resisting differentiation of natural forests from plantations for climate funding," said Patrick Alley of Global Witness. "Now it is clearly in the thick of a push to define palm oil as a sustainable biofuel despite the huge adverse environmental impacts of its production. EU member nations should insist that this unacceptable assistance to the palm oil industry be dropped."

The three-day ministerial meeting to address protection of biodiversity and ecosystems, organized by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), comes two months after UN climate change talks in Copenhagen failed to deliver consensus on a global climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol.

Prior to resumption of UN climate talks this spring, the UNEP meeting represents an important opportunity to address revision of the forest definitions currently used by the UN, which fail to distinguish natural forests from plantations, allowing for forests to be clear-felled or converted to plantations under the guise of protecting them and reducing emissions.<sup>(2)</sup>

"The reclassification of oil palm plantations as forests makes a mockery of the notion of protecting forests to protect the climate," said Simon Counsell of Rainforest Foundation UK. "The United Nations needs to go

back to the drawing board and establish a new definition of forests that recognizes the complexity and biodiversity of natural forest ecosystems.”

“The emissions are particularly massive from conversion of carbon-rich peatswamps in Indonesia and Malaysia, due to ongoing and continuous drainage of wet peatsoils,” said Susanna Tol of Wetlands International.

Another consequence is loss of biodiversity, most urgently in Indonesia where the continued survival of orang-utans in the wild hangs in the balance.

“The issue of clarifying natural forest definitions on a biome basis has been on the UNFCCC agenda for years, but repeatedly shunted onto the back-burner,” said Alistair Graham of Humane Society International. “Now is the time to make sensible forest definitions a priority, since these tricky definitional maneuvers reveal that the safeguard provisions in the REDD text under negotiation are insufficient on their own. “

“Large scale conversion of natural forests and peatsoils to plantations is also going unreported and unaccounted for in developed countries because of the current forest definitions, resulting in huge emissions loopholes,” added Peg Putt of The Wilderness Society.

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#### Notes

(1) The *Jakarta Post* reported last week on Indonesian forest ministry efforts to redefine oil palm plantations as forests in order to claim eligibility for carbon credits or funding under the mechanism to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD). Days earlier a leaked European Commission paper on its “biofuels and bioliquids sustainability scheme” detailed how “a change from forest to oil palm plantation would not per se constitute a breach of the criterion” for sustainability, thus green-lighting conversion of forests for biofuel production.

(2) The definitional revisions must address differentiation of “natural forests” into separate “biomes” (for example, “cool/temperate,” “wet tropical,” or “peatswamp” forests) to reflect the wide-ranging carbon and biodiversity values of different biomes, and the varying management problems they face and conservation opportunities they present.

The Ecosystems Climate Alliance (ECA) ([www.ecosystemsclimate.org](http://www.ecosystemsclimate.org)) is an alliance of environment and social NGOs committed to keeping natural terrestrial ecosystems intact and their carbon out of the atmosphere, in an equitable and transparent way that respects the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. ECA comprises the Australian Orangutan Project, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), Global Witness, Humane Society International, Nepenthes, Rainforest Action Network, Rainforest Foundation Norway, The Rainforest Foundation U.K., Wetlands International, and The Wilderness Society.