

Forestry sector cultivates SDG action plan

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With scrutiny around corporate strategies related to deforestation intensifying, a select group of companies representing the forestry sector have published the latest in a series of industry-specific guides meant to help meaningful corporate action take root.

The Forest Sector Roadmap, launched in mid-July during a gathering in New York, is the latest in a series of publications coordinated by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and intended to help companies map their sustainability agendas to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The goals are to be met by 2030, and policymakers all over the world are working to meet that deadline with the support of private-sector partners. The forestry roadmap, meant to accelerate corporate action among pulp and paper companies primarily, was the result of a year and a half of collaboration between WBCSD member companies, NGOS and other stakeholders.

Francisco Ruiz-Tagle, CEO of multinational forestry company CMPC, and one of the 11 paper and forestry companies that make up the WBCSD's Forest Solutions Group, believes that companies like his, especially within the forest sector, can be powerful allies to policymakers in meeting the SDGs — when they choose to take action.

"Working on sustainable forest management is a tremendous opportunity for this industry, and of course this industry has 35 of the most important companies in the world," he said. "But we have a lot of room to grow to enhance our reforestation and restoration efforts, for instance, which is of course very connected to climate change, given the ability of trees to capture carbon."

The Forest Solutions Group includes Aditya Birla Group, CampbellGlobal, CMPC, Hancock Natural Resource Group, International Paper, Mondi, NewForests, The Navigator Company, Smurfit Kapp, Stora Enso and Sumitomo Forestry.

The forestry sector has an integral role to play in meeting the SDGs, Ruiz-Tagle believes, because of the inherent cyclical nature of forest products — when forests are managed correctly.

"All of our products, all of them are renewable. You cut a tree, you produce your wood, and then a tree will grow again in the same place. So absolutely renewable," he said.

The guide identifies six SDGs as being core in shaping the future of companies in this sector:

No. 6 – Clean water and sanitation

No. 7 – Affordable and clean energy

No. 8 – Decent work and economic growth

No. 12 – Responsible consumption and production

No. 13 – Climate action

No. 15 – Life on land

However, not every forestry company chooses to use ethical practices, which is one of the challenges in creating a document such as the Forest Sector Roadmap.

WBCSD's 200-plus member companies generally put sustainability at the top of their agenda, but they don't represent the entirety of their industries. The Forest Solutions Group felt that it needed to address the impact of bad actors in the industry to illustrate the ways that poor forest management exacerbates climate change. For that reason, the roadmap also breaks down the negative consequences of poor forest management such as water contamination, deforestation and more.

Deforestation is responsible for about 15 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, and forestry companies have fallen behind on curbing it. Only 8 percent of the forestry companies in areas with the most forest risk have committed to zero deforestation. What's more, companies are often not transparent about their impact — a new CDP study found that 70 percent of high-impact companies had failed to report forest-related information.

"Some of the negative impacts of forestry, they don't represent the actions of our member companies, so we had the option of trying to portray the industry as a whole and the reality of the entire forest sector ... not just this small group of companies," said Louis Rochartre, director of the Forest Solutions Group for WBCSD. "We made a special mention of deforestation, which is really important for the forest sector as a whole, but in the case of our companies, none of them base their business on this type of behavior ... but we addressed the issue."

Rochartre said WBCSD hopes to see the roadmap guide actions of many forestry companies, not just current members of the Forest Solutions Group.

The sector roadmaps developed by the WBCSD are different from many other sustainability reports — they are action-based and include concrete examples of what works.

For example, the forestry roadmap includes a section on water management along with suggestions of recommended partners to reduce water waste and develop wastewater circulation strategies. It highlights NGOS, policymakers, municipalities and peers in the sector and includes a tangible case study about the Mondi company in South Africa, which partnered with the WWF to promote environmental stewardship in the paper industry.

The WBCSD roadmaps were first designed in response to the "Better Business, Better World Report," which calls for industries to collaborate to determine how they could meet the SDGs. There are now three roadmaps, including ones for chemical and the Indian cement sector; one for the oil and gas industry is under development. The roadmaps provide a space for companies to come together to develop a plan for widespread, transformative industry change at scale in order to meet the SDGs.

"The idea of roadmaps is really that they should be a forward-looking document. It is not a report on all the good things that have been done in the past, but really looking and saying 'Ok, what are the concrete actions that can be taken, into the future, out to 2030 and beyond?' which will then maximize the impact on the SDGs," said Uta Jungermann, sustainability manager for WBCSD.

As for the companies behind the Forest Solutions Group, CMPC is transparent about how it is working to meet the SDGs by 2030 — they are integrated into the company's annual report alongside its financials, Ruiz-Tagle said.

CMPC has been involved in various sustainability initiatives recently, including the creation of a 336-acre protection zone (PDF) in Chile. But that's just one company: in order to meet the SDGs, businesses across the entire forestry sector must commit to more ethical and sustainable practices.

To that end, the WBCSD has created a dedicated webpage for the roadmap with resources and is developing a media campaign to encourage broader awareness with forestry companies outside of the group, the general public and policymakers around the world.

"We have to discuss how to transmit this to our stakeholders ... this is a starting point. We need to make an effort to transmit this, because it's going to be really top-down in these companies," Ruiz-Tagle said.

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