

Can global brands avoid 'greenwash' with new forest-saving plan?

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A new push by global household brands to combat tropical forest loss must do better at reducing deforestation across whole supply chains if it is to succeed where earlier efforts failed, environmentalists warned.

High-profile members of the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF) this week launched the "Forest Positive Coalition of Action", vowing to speed up work to stop key commodity supply chains causing further loss of forests, in a bid to curb climate change.

But the launch was met with scepticism by many green groups after the Paris-based CGF struggled to meet a 2020 target set a decade ago to purchase only sustainably produced commodities, including palm oil, soy, beef, paper, and pulp.

"We've seen ten years of inaction, half-measures and greenwashing from the CGF, while human rights defenders and frontline communities have been putting their lives on the line to defend forests," said Brihannala Morgan, a senior campaigner at U.S.-based environmental group Rainforest Action Network.

"We have an increasingly narrow window of time to take real action," she added in a statement.

In 2019, tropical rainforests - whose preservation is considered crucial to limiting planetary heating - disappeared at a rate of one football pitch every six seconds, according to data from online monitoring service Global Forest Watch.

Green groups blame the production of palm oil, the world's most widely used edible oil, and other agricultural commodities for much of the destruction, as forests are cleared for plantations, ranches and farms.

The 17 consumer brands, retailers and manufacturers making up the new forest coalition - which have a collective market value of \$1.8 trillion - include Carrefour, Walmart, General Mills, Mars, Nestle, Unilever and PepsiCo.

Led by their chief executive officers, the group will aim to fast-track efforts to remove deforestation from supply chains and create best-practice plans for each commodity.

Environmentalists say conserving existing forests and restoring damaged ones reduces the risk of flooding, reins in global warming by storing more carbon and protects biodiversity.

"The executives of these CGF companies live on the same planet as the rest of us, and we all face the same climate emergency," said Morgan.

Jeff Conant, forests program director at Friends of the Earth US, said agribusiness and consumer brands had been making "empty promises for a decade while continuing to profit from the destruction", as wildfires and storms batter a warming world.

"Unless we see real action, we can expect that whatever the CGF says about being 'forest positive' is pure, utter greenwash," he added.

EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

The CGF, a member-funded organisation, seeks solutions to major challenges that companies cannot tackle alone, including deforestation and forced labour.

Late last year, the group said that while progress had been made with its non-binding commitment to halt deforestation by 2020, an overemphasis on green certification had not led to sustainability becoming the norm across entire supply chains.

Many companies have invested in ways to ensure their materials can be certified as sustainable, including technologies - like radar, phone apps, and satellite imagery - to detect problems when they arise and tackle them as quickly as possible.

Some have imposed rules on suppliers and stopped working with those that have cleared forests, while others have teamed up with green groups to help small farmers improve practices.

But mapping and tracking supply chains from the farmer to the plate is challenging, especially as many commodities are produced by small growers in isolated rural areas.

Didier Bergeret, director of social sustainability at the CGF, said the forum would not set fresh deadlines for now, but companies that wanted to make fast progress would lead, with others able to join later.

"I'm not even saying it's revolutionary - rather the contrary - it's just an evolution of the way we are doing things, trying to make sure that we learned our lessons," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The commodity "roadmaps" being developed will have performance indicators and follow global sustainable development goals, with input from environmental and other civil society groups, he added.

Regular meetings will be held to check on progress, including workshops for CGF company CEOs, he said, with the aim of implementing the roadmaps over the next two to three years.

Failing to achieve the 2020 goal "doesn't prevent us from continuing to believe action is needed", Bergeret said.

The hope is that the new framework will be "effective in fixing what went wrong last time, while still capitalising on what was good", he added.

By joining the coalition, each firm commits to implementing the steps in the roadmaps - for palm oil, soy, paper, pulp, and fibre-based packaging - within their own supply chains, he said.

The CGF said its members would work with suppliers, traders and governments, in both producer and importing nations, to encourage them to put in place measures to conserve forests.

"We believe forest protection is a driver of economic growth, not a sacrifice to growth," Mars Chief Executive Grant Reid said in a statement. "(It) provides healthy ecosystems and supports productive landscapes and resilient communities."

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/business/can-global-brands-avoid-greenwash-with-new-forest-saving-plan-892796.html>