

Thailand testing new way to demonstrate if timber is legal

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In the late 1980s, increasingly aware of the adverse effects of the rapid decline of its natural forest resources, the Government of Thailand imposed a logging ban in all natural forests. Together with the depletion of forest resources, the ban led to a drop in domestic supply. Source: Timberbiz

The Government looked for ways to involve the private sector and in particular local communities in generating alternative wood supplies. Nonetheless, until recently, even if Thai people could grow commercial trees on the land they own, forest laws prohibited them from cutting and transporting important timber species unless their land was registered, inspected and local authorities informed before harvests.

Changes introduced in 2019 in the law governing forestry may finally promote reforestation efforts.

Mongkol Wandee, a carpenter of the Lampang province in Thailand, explains: "Thirty years ago, my father planted teak trees, resin trees and rain trees on his land. His idea was to ensure that our family could use them for additional income, but so far we have not been able to sell them."

Wandee constructs wooden houses and makes furniture. His wife works as a nurse assistant in the capital Bangkok, 600 kilometres away from their home. The couple's combined income takes care of their family of six, supplemented by selling the coffee, longan and mangos that grow on the family's land.

Wandee's family house is also part of a village that borders the Mae Pai Natural Preservation Forest and is only five kilometres away from the Chae Son National Park.

Trees in these protected forests were illegally cut and transported in the past. To combat this, timber coming from the area is scrutinised. As a result, local tree growers have found it challenging to come up with the right documentation to prove the legality of the timber grown on their land.

Farmers and other tree growers in Thailand try to earn a living selling timber legally from their land to traders, artisans and furniture makers. But they have often faced difficulties proving that they're operating within the bounds of the law, as their land is usually not registered as a timber plantation.

This was a problem that the Private Forest Plantation Cooperative Limited – a cooperative of tree growing farmers and private landowners – was aware of, and keen to address.

"We were aware of the limitations around harvesting and transportation of certain tree species. We have been pushing for amendments to forest laws to improve the situation for farmers," said Yingluk Patibhantewa, Chair of the Private Forest Plantation Cooperative.

"When the Government started to review the forest law in Thailand as part of timber trade negotiations with the EU, this was a good time for us to raise this topic again."

In 2019, the Thai Government changed regulations regarding the use of trees on private land. For the first time, farmers can legally harvest all trees on their land without having to inform a Royal Forest Department officer first.

Thai stakeholders are currently testing a new mechanism enabling farmers to demonstrate that their timber originates from their land and is therefore of a legal source. With the changes being so recent, the impacts for farmers and tree growers are not yet clear, but Wandee has some ideas what this will mean for his family.

"The recent changes will help my family a lot," said Wandee. "We have mature teak trees on our land that can be used to start producing products. What I would like to do is get a processing licence so I can set up a furniture

carpentry workshop that is able to gather materials, process timber and transport products legally.

“I will replant the trees on our land, so we have a long-term raw material supply for the workshop. The workshop should provide us with enough additional income for my wife to finally come home and work in the business.”

Thailand started engaging with the European Union on legal timber trade in 2013. As part of the EU’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan, the EU negotiates timber trade agreements with tropical timber producing countries.

These agreements – called Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) – set the terms for trade in legal timber and promote good governance of the forest sector.

“We have continuously worked to improve our country’s framework for standard certification and management of the forest sector,” said Athapol Charoenshunsu, Director-General of Thailand’s Royal Forest Department.

“Our biggest challenge has been in determining the origin of trees and their traceability to prevent illegal timber from entering the system. The work with the EU as part of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement has enabled us to develop a framework where we can propel the country to a sustainable forest management standard and timber legality assurance system which will confirm quality of timber from Thailand.”

Source: <https://www.timberbiz.com.au/thailand-testing-new-way-to-demonstrate-if-timber-is-legal/>