

Press release

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British NGOs challenge Indonesian government and industry on palm oil claims

Down to Earth (UK), Forest Peoples Programme, Biofuelwatch, Econexus, Sumatran Orangutan Society UK, Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation UK and Carbon Trade Watch

Indonesian government and palm oil industry representatives will be promoting 'sustainable palm oil' during a seminar in London today, which has been organised by the Indonesian government.

Social and environmental NGOs warn that Indonesia's palm oil industry continues to be linked to deforestation and biodiversity losses, human rights abuses and displacement of indigenous peoples and local communities. According to the World Bank, Indonesia is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than any country apart from the US and China, primarily because of the destruction of peatlands and rainforests. According to a recent United Nations report, palm oil is now the main cause of permanent rainforest loss in both Indonesia and Malaysia. Many species, including orangutans, are expected to become extinct in the wild within a few years unless this trend is stopped.

Marcus Colchester from the Forest Peoples Programme says: "The industry representatives speaking in London today have signed up to the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil, which aims to certify sustainable palm oil. We now need to see major changes in industry practices and government policy and implementation. There must be an end to forest and peatland destruction for palm oil and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and other local communities, who are still losing their land to monoculture plantations. We also need to see respect for the rights of workers and smallholders. In line with the opinion of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Indonesian government needs to push through legal reforms securing the land rights of indigenous peoples and respecting their right to give or withhold consent to the establishment of oil palm estates on their lands."

At present, Indonesia has around 6.5 million hectares of palm oil plantations. There are reports of government plans to convert a further 20 million hectares to oil palms over the next two decades – which would result in a total plantation area larger than the UK.

According to the Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, some 5 million people in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, alone, are likely to become 'biofuel refugees' due to palm oil expansion in the near future.

The Indonesian grassroots NGO Sawit Watch will be addressing the situation of small holders during the meeting. Sawit Watch warned earlier this year that European biofuel targets were driving up the demand for palm oil, thus fuelling social and land conflicts and undermining Indonesia's land reform programme.

Almuth Ernsting from Biofuelwatch explains: "The Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil must not be used as an excuse for promoting palm oil for bioenergy. We are deeply concerned that energy companies will seek to use the small amount of palm oil which will be certified as sustainable, whilst driving ever faster monoculture expansion into South-east Asia's remaining rainforests and into community lands on which people depend for their food and livelihoods. This must not be allowed to happen".

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Notes:

1. The Seminar on Promoting Sustainable Palm Oil will be held at Hyatt Regency Churchill at Marble Ark on Monday, 31st October, 10am to 1pm. It has been organised by the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture. Speakers will be industry representatives from PP London Sumatra Indonesia, Unilever (on behalf of the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil), the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI) and Jardine Matheson Holdings Ltd, as well as one speaker from the NGO Sawit Watch.

2. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil has agreed principles and criteria for sustainable palm oil but does not yet certify any palm oil. Verification will be debated at a members' conference in November.

3. For details of greenhouse gas emissions from peatland destruction in Indonesia, see: <http://www.wetlands.org/publication.aspx?id=51a80e5f-4479-4200-9be0-66f1aa9f9ca9> and for details of emissions from deforestation see http://whrc.org/policy/COP/Brazil/compensated%20reduction_flyer.pdf .

4. The 2007 United Nations Report "Last Stand of the Orangutan" (produced by UNEP) identifies palm oil as the main cause of permanent rainforest loss in Indonesia and Malaysia: <http://www.unep.org/grasp/docs/2007Jan-LastStand-of-Orangutan-report.pdf> .

5. For the full report of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on palm oil, see: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/6session_crp6.doc
For the warning by the Chair of the UN Forum about 5 million potential biofuel refugees in West Kalimantan, see: http://www.checkbiotech.org/green_News_Biofuels.aspx?infol=14672

6. Sawit Watch published an Open Letter to the EU on 31st January, warning "Palm oil for biofuels increases social conflicts and undermines land reform in Indonesia". The text of the letter can be found at <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/biofuelwatch/message/245> .
Sawit Watch contributed to two reports about the impacts of oil palm plantations on indigenous peoples, other local communities, and small holders, published in 2006: http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/prv_sector/oil_palm/oil_palm_press_rel_indonesia_nov06_eng.shtml .

7. Friends of the Earth Netherlands and two Indonesian NGOs have published evidence that the world's largest palm oil trade, the South-east Asian company Wilmar Group, routinely breach their own standards and those of the RSPO by using fire to clear land, destroying old-growth forests, and illegally acquiring land belonging to local communities without their full informed consent. Wilmar Group are members of the RSPO. See: http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2007/Wilmar_Palm_Oil_Environmental_Social_Impact.pdf .