
Cameroon: Rainforests continue to be logged illegally

From October 13th to 16th the Africa Forest Law Enforcement and Governance ministerial meeting will take place in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Whether this initiative will result in any concrete actions to tackle the immense problem of illegal and unsustainable logging operations in Africa remains to be seen. In the meantime, illegal logging in Cameroon's forests continues to wreak havoc on the environment, economy and local peoples' livelihoods.

The abuse of the legal logging licences known as "ventes de coupe" to launder illegal timber into the market place is being systematically perpetrated in the country, including by subsidiaries of European companies. Ventes de coupe are titles to log an area of 2,500 hectares of the non-permanent forest estate over a three year period. Due to the short-term nature of the title, and the lack of requirement for any management plan, the forests are often logged in a highly destructive manner. The titles are also frequently abused to organise illegal logging over a much larger area.

In March 2003, researchers from Forests Monitor, together with the Cameroonian NGO Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) and Greenpeace, investigated the operations of two Dutch companies, Wijma and Reef, in the forests of South and Southwest Provinces. This was the second time Forests Monitor and Greenpeace had investigated the operations of Wijma, having discovered widespread illegal logging by the company in July 2002 (see www.forestsmonitor.org). The company has been sanctioned by the government on several occasions for logging illegally. Illegal logging by these European-headquartered companies has caused environmental and social damage locally, as well as robbing the Cameroonian government and communities of legitimate timber revenues.

The Dutch logger and timber importer Wijma claims to be committed to "full compliance with all relevant forest regulations" in Africa and "to achieving environmental best practice throughout its activity whenever this is practical". Despite these claims, in March 2003 investigators from Forests Monitor, CED and Greenpeace documented further evidence of the company's illegal activities in Cameroon. The investigations uncovered serious abuses of the company's legally allocated logging title vente de coupe 09-04-59, situated in the department of the Ntem valley in South Province, which Wijma exploited in 2001. Using a GPS receiver, the NGOs recorded two extensive road networks to the East and South of the legal logging area, 11 log ponds and abandoned logs and stumps over an area of about 14 km² outside Wijma's legal boundaries. Abandoned logs with the markings of the legal title 09-04-59 and the company's markings (GWZ) were found in log ponds well outside their official limits, a clear method of laundering illegal timber into the marketplace. The investigators also found that the company had illegally logged significant amounts of timber from an unallocated forest management unit UFA 09-022. As well as the lost timber revenues to the government and communities, this illegal logging operation had serious consequences for local people, with illegal road construction and logging having destroyed agricultural crops and small-scale plantations cultivated by the local farmers. At least 27 local farmers in three villages were affected, with immediate consequences for local livelihoods as both food and cash crops were destroyed.

Reef is a Dutch company specialising in the production of wood for marine construction. It prides

itself on its environmental reputation and is a founder member of the FSC-Netherlands. However, in March 2003 Forests Monitor, CED and Greenpeace found illegal logging operations in Reef's ventes de coupe (VC) 11-06-12 and 11-06-13 in the Southwest province of Cameroon. In VC 11-06-12, Reef works with the Cameroonian company SEPFECO. Forests Monitor, CED and Greenpeace investigators found a road network about 5 kilometres away from the legal logging area, with 6 log ponds along the illegal roads. Logs carrying the markings of the legal title were found in the log ponds, indicating fraudulent use well outside the legal logging limits. In addition, numerous plantations were destroyed by the illegal logging operation. In VC 11-06-13, the villagers of Molongo, situated inside the vente de coupe, had erected traditional barriers to stop logging in protest at Reef and partner PMF Wood's failure to keep promises made: they had promised to build substantial bridges that could be used by villagers after the logging operation had finished, but instead had constructed temporary bridges that would last just long enough to evacuate the logs; they had promised to build several good roads; they had promised to provide materials for the construction of a village community hall, church and school. The one road that the village had itself invested in was destroyed by the logging operations, rendering it impassable by car and even on foot in the rainy season. Local farmers' cocoa plantations had also been destroyed by the logging operation. In addition, investigators found a log pond outside the southern boundary of the vente de coupe containing several logs fraudulently marked with the legal logging title.

In both the Wijma and Reef cases above, not only was there evidence of logging outside permitted areas and the fraudulent use of legal logging titles to launder illegally felled timber into the market place, operations also caused severe hardship for local communities, destroying subsistence and cash crops. To make matters worse, promises of infrastructure developments that had been made were unfulfilled, and local revenues had not been paid. In such cases, logging operations exacerbate poverty amongst local communities as well as robbing the government of Cameroon of timber revenues. The NGOs have used the evidence gathered to press the companies to pay full and immediate compensation to all the local farmers and communities whose livelihoods have been damaged by these operations, with Reef having now made an initial payment into the Molongo village fund. The NGOs have also urged the Cameroonian government to take appropriate measures to sanction the companies.

By: Forests Monitor, e-mail: mail@forestsmonitor.org