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## The US must cut emissions, not forests

In the last two years across the US, extreme weather linked to climate change has left thousands dead and cost tens of billions of dollars, disproportionately impacting the elderly, children, the poor, and people of color. By all scientific accounts, it's going to get worse. How much worse depends entirely on the rate and extent to which we are willing to embrace rapid and far-reaching changes across society.

Global leaders are meeting in Poland this week to resume climate negotiations. The 24th Council of the Parties (COP24) comes less than two weeks after the release of the US Government's Fourth National Climate Assessment, ironically released on Black Friday, a day when American overconsumption is at an all-time high. The report issued some harsh news about the extent to which Americans are already experiencing devastating human, ecological, and economic impacts of climate change. It warns of more devastating health impacts and catastrophic economic losses to come if action is not taken.

The Southeastern region of the US—the world's largest wood-producing region where logging rates are four times greater than South American rainforests—is expected to be among the hardest hit by climate change in the coming years. Yet, as climate science points to an urgent need to protect more forests, the US forest industry—the largest in the world—and government are promoting *more*, not less, destructive industrial logging and consumption of wood products.



A mountain of paper waste (left), a clearcut southern forest (right).

### ***New IPCC Report Calls for Rapid and Far-reaching Transformation of Industry***

In October, an IPCC report was released detailing the latest analysis of what can be done to limit temperature increases to 1.5 degrees by the end of the century and calling for “rapid and far-reaching transitions” across all industrial sectors, including the land sector. Forests, which release carbon when cleared but actively absorb carbon as they grow, have become central in the global conversations about climate solutions. In fact, forests are expected to be a major topic of conversation at COP24 in Poland this month.

Some will debate whether or not forest protection should be used to offset fossil fuel emissions. But that is a red herring. We must both rapidly reduce emissions from fossil fuels AND protect forests. One without the other is a recipe for failure.

With the latest IPCC report highlighting the critical role of forests, we can no longer avoid confronting and addressing the climate impacts of the US forest industry. Though US forests often get sidestepped in the global discussion about climate action, it’s vital that the world’s largest wood-producing and consuming nation be held accountable for reducing its climate impacts. It’s as important to transform forest management in the US as it is elsewhere in the world.

The IPCC report sets forth three major strategies that underscore the urgent need to keep vastly more of America's forests standing:

- Drastically reducing carbon emissions
- Removing carbon from the atmosphere
- Enhancing vulnerable communities' ability to withstand climate impacts

### *Cutting Emissions Not Forests*

First, we must drastically cut carbon emissions. Yet, when forests are logged, carbon that would otherwise be stored in the forest is emitted into the atmosphere instead. Though these emissions are significant, they remain largely unreported. Recent scientific reports are shedding a light on this problem, including an Oregon State University analysis documenting that emissions from the forestry sector in their state exceed that of the fossil fuel industry. The US Forest Service has also acknowledged that “timber harvesting, and not land use change or fire, was the largest source of gross emissions from US forests between 2006 and 2010.” The US must account and set targets for reducing carbon emissions from logging.

### *Removing Carbon Dioxide from the Atmosphere*

Second, we must actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The IPCC report highlights significant economic risks and land impacts associated with Bioenergy Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS)—a technology that relies on burning trees for electricity and capturing the carbon emissions. Attempts to develop this technology have thus far been too costly and failed to work effectively. But, as the IPCC report points out, we don't need this expensive, unproven technology to solve the problem. Instead we can let forests grow, storing carbon currently in the atmosphere back on the land.



Mature wetland forests like this one are best at storing carbon and protecting local communities from flooding.

As forests grow, their capacity to capture and store carbon accelerates. The older a tree, the better job it does at absorbing carbon. Rather than planting new forests, we can remove far more carbon from the atmosphere over the next decade by allowing degraded natural forests to grow older. With a short window to affect change, letting existing natural forests grow must become a top priority. We must both stop the loss of and curtail industrial logging in natural forests.

Due to a combination of forest loss and industrial logging practices that have replaced old, intact forests with a patchwork of industrial pine plantations, clearcuts, and degraded natural forests, US forests currently store only 40% of the carbon they once did. Forest carbon stocks in the Southeastern region are currently among the lowest in the world. However, a new report published in Nature in 2017 documents that this

region's forest carbon stocks could be among the highest in the world if forests were allowed to grow.

### *Strengthening Adaptation Through Equitable Economic Development*

Third, by protecting and restoring the connectivity and intactness of natural forests, we can optimize natural flood control, stabilize fresh water supplies, and turn up the Earth's natural air conditioning system. At a time when floods, droughts, and heat waves are getting more intense, we need to be doing everything we can to restore intactness and connectivity across natural forests to protect human life and mitigate economic losses.

According to recent maps produced by the World Resources Institute, most major watersheds across the coastal plain of the US South are at “high risk” due to “recent forest cover loss.” Satellite imagery analysis conducted by the University of Maryland documents that “intensive forest management” aka logging is driving this forest cover loss.

Too few realize the persistent and pervasive poverty that exists across the Southern Coastal Plain of the Southeast, one of the heaviest logged regions of the world. Logging has not created sustainable or equitable economic conditions in these rural communities, which are being disproportionately impacted by extreme flooding linked to climate change.

As the IPCC report points out, strategies that focus on restoring degraded forests and the natural benefits they provide are also the most consistent with considering ethics and equity in helping the low income and vulnerable better cope with a changing climate. As we transition the economy to build resilient natural landscapes through forest protection and restoration, we can and must create a more diversified economy that works for more people. Creating equity in the economy improves poor and marginalized communities' ability to withstand the harsh impacts of climate change.

### *Industry is Blocking Climate Progress*

Instead of embracing innovative transformation, the US continues to deflect attention away from logging as a climate problem, insisting that the biggest threat to forests is “deforestation” — the loss to urban development and agriculture — and that markets for wood help ensure that we “keep forests in forests.” Over a hundred wood product companies, forestry schools, forestry agencies and associations recently joined forces to deliver this decades-old message in a communications effort branded #forestproud. They assert that the production and consumption of wood is not a climate problem but rather a solution, so it’s best for everyone if we keep on consuming more and more wood products.

This old narrative comes in the wake of recent data documenting that logging is the single largest driver of forest carbon loss from US forests, releasing five times the annual amount of carbon loss from development or agriculture and fire **combined**. Yet, industry continues to perpetuate the misleading idea that forests are a “renewable resource” and that as long as we can continue to have forests that produce consumer products (regardless of the condition of the forests), our forests are “sustainable.” A case in point is the emergence of a rapidly expanding new wood pellet export market, guised as “renewable energy”.

Though Hundreds of scientists have warned that burning wood pellets to generate electricity releases more carbon than coal per unit of electricity generated and further degrades forest carbon sinks, the expansion of wood pellet production across the Southern US continues. Enviva, the world’s largest wood pellet exporter is currently planning ongoing expansions in poor, rural communities of color in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina. These communities already live among the highest logging rates in the world, suffer some of the highest poverty rates in the nation, and are now suffering from some of the worst flooding from climate change.





A wetland clearcut traced directly to Enviva (left) and Enviva's wood pellet manufacturing facility in Ahoskie, NC (right).

Caption: A wetland clearcut traced directly to Enviva (left) and Enviva's wood pellet manufacturing facility in Ahoskie, NC (right).

Meanwhile independent science is increasingly clear. Industrial logging has significantly compromised US forests' ability to provide critical life-supporting services and to remove carbon from the atmosphere and store it on the land. Policy makers must acknowledge the big financial stake that the US forest industry has in protecting the status quo and must embrace leading-edge, independent forest and climate change science. New policies must be enacted that drive rapid and far-reaching transformation in the forestry sector of the US economy.

### ***Limiting the Production of Wood Products is Key to Protecting Forests and Communities***

We must limit (not expand) the industrial-scale logging of forests so that we can expand forest carbon sinks while restoring natural protections against extreme weather events. While we do need some wood products, we can no longer afford wasteful, one-time use forest products any more than we can afford to continue to consume wasteful, one-time use plastics. Turning forests into fuel is a false solution that must be stopped. While ambitious, if we work together, we can expand the protection and restoration of natural forests in the US.

The IPCC report warns of challenging times ahead, an immense amount of work to transition industry, and a short 12 year time-frame for achieving results. Transformation is possible, but it cannot happen in the timeframe necessary to avoid catastrophe if the forest industry continues to resist the need to let vastly more of America's forests grow. But, the good news is that there is a strong, growing and diverse national movement working to protect US forests as a climate solution. From challenging the use of wood pellets for electricity to advocating for the protection of wetland forests for flood control, forest protection is becoming a central part of the climate conversation in the US. It's now time to advance feasible forest-based climate strategies, such as those set forth in a recent Climate Land Ambition Rights Alliance report.



A growing, diverse movement is calling for forest protection across the U.S.



