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Contact: Don Lehr, [dblehr@cs.com](mailto:dblehr@cs.com), +1.917.304.4058

## Campaigners call for change on UN forest definitions to protect the climate

Bonn – As climate change negotiations resume here this week, a coalition of environmental campaigners has called on the UN’s scientific and technological advisory body<sup>(1)</sup> to create a new forest definition that differentiates natural forests from plantations. This is needed to prevent global efforts to protect forests and the climate from being undermined, according to the Ecosystems Climate Alliance (ECA).

The UN’s current definition of “forests” fails to distinguish between intact natural forests, modified natural forests, and plantations. Complex, biodiverse natural forests, therefore, could be logged or burnt and replaced with plantations – and this action would be regarded as having caused no change in the “forest.” Such a loophole allows deforestation and forest degradation to occur without sanction.

“The Bonn meeting represents an important opportunity to address revision of the UN’s forest definition,” said Sean Cadman of The Wilderness Society. “A new definition must be developed that properly distinguishes between natural forests and plantations, and eliminates the loophole that currently allows forests to be clear-cut or converted to plantations under the guise of protecting them and reducing emissions.”

The conversion of natural forests, whether to wood plantations or oil palm plantations, creates substantial greenhouse gas emissions, with up to 80% of carbon lost to the atmosphere depending on the type of forest ecosystem destroyed and the type of plantation which replaces it. In total, deforestation and forest degradation accounts for 12 to 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

“The emissions are particularly high from conversion of carbon-rich peatlands in Indonesia and Malaysia to large-scale oil palm and acacia,” said Susanna Tol of Wetlands International.

“Forests can be pushed to the point of ecosystem collapse and still not be classified ‘deforested’ under the current definition,” said Peg Putt of The Wilderness Society.

“The issue of clarifying natural forest definitions on a biome basis<sup>(2)</sup> has been on the UNFCCC agenda for years because of application problems in developed countries, but it’s repeatedly shunted onto the back-burner,” said Alistair Graham of Humane Society International. “Now is the time to make sensible forest definitions a priority, since the tricky definitional maneuvers we see now reveal that the safeguard provisions in the REDD text under negotiation are insufficient on their own.”

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(1) Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice, known as SBSTA.

(2) The definitional revisions must address differentiation of “natural forests” into separate “biomes” (for example, “cool/temperate,” “wet tropical,” or “peatswamp” forests) to reflect the wide-ranging carbon and biodiversity values of different biomes, and the varying management problems they face and conservation opportunities they present.

The Ecosystems Climate Alliance ([www.ecosystemsclimate.org](http://www.ecosystemsclimate.org)) is an alliance of NGOs committed to keeping natural terrestrial ecosystems intact and their carbon out of the atmosphere. We work to ensure this is done in a way which is equitable, transparent, consistent with the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and which takes place alongside deep and urgent cuts in fossil fuel emissions. ECA comprises Australian Orangutan Project, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), Global Witness, Humane Society International, Nepenthes, Rainforest Action Network, Rainforest Foundation Norway, The Rainforest Foundation U.K., Wetlands International, and The Wilderness Society.