Tropical and topical

Burger King rejects unsustainable palm oil

The AP reported in early September that Burger King, a major US hamburger chain, will cancel their contract with PT Sinar Mas Agro Resources and Technology due to reports of unsustainable oil palm plantation practices. An independent audit found that the company was in violation of regulations which included planting in some peatland swamps and secondary forests. Recently companies such as Unilever, Nestle and Kraft foods among others have dropped Sinar Mas as a supplier based on accusations of deforestation and other unsustainable practices (including destroying the habitat of orangutans and other endangered species) from the environmental group Greenpeace, which has a long-running campaign against palm oil. Burger King did not say where any alternate source of palm oil — used in cooking oil for frying — would come from. Sinar Mas said in a statement it was disappointed with Burger King's decision, but would work hard to convince the company that it was committed to sustainable practices.

Peru looking inwards to move upwards

Peru is finding that home is where the hardwood is. The first half of 2010 saw exports of wood products from Peru increase by 31 percent compared to the previous year, according to figures just released by Peru's export association. However, due to strong growth of Peru's economy, estimated imports of wood products within a decade could reach US$2 billion per year, dwarfing exports (Peru's imports of wood products, worth about US$800 million in 2009, are already three times its exports). Imports could be reduced if there were a greater domestic supply of wood from Peru's forests, which are the ninth largest in the world and fourth amongst tropical countries. According to Reforesta Peru, the country's 13 million hectares of forest could sustainably produce exports worth up to US$3 billion, with an additional area of 8.5 million hectares of degraded/deforested land available for reforestation. However, those in the industry point out the many problems that could restrict Peru's ability to capitalize on its forest wealth. High transport costs, lack of proper training, lack of sufficient investment in technology (especially wood drying kilns) and lack of a coherent state policy for a sector where investments mature in two decades, are major hurdles hindering expansion of Peru's forest sector.

Abuzz for shade farmed coffee

A recent study[1] shows that bees may be instrumental in pollinating native trees in shade-grown coffee farms and adjacent patches of forest. According to the report, some native species of bees help enhance the diversity of remnant native tree species by facilitating gene flow between the remnant forest and adjacent shade-grown coffee farms. Previous studies have shown that shade-grown farms improve biodiversity by providing a habitat for birds, bats and other creatures beneficial to the farm and forest. The genetic diversity provided by shade farming can provide a reservoir for future forest regeneration. Shade-grown coffee was the norm forty years ago, and most of the coffee consumed by the general public was grown in the shade of the canopy of tropical forests. However, coffee farmers realized that they could significantly raise the production of coffee by growing their crop in the sun following clear cutting of the forest, which has resulted in the destruction of millions of hectares of rainforest. The study advocates the promotion of shade-grown coffee which would benefit farmers and biodiversity while also requiring less synthetic fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides than open-grown coffee plantations.

1 *Jha, S. and Dick, C.W. 2010.Native bees mediate long-distance pollen dispersal in a shade coffee landscape mosaic. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. http://www.pnas.org/content/107/31/13760*

Bridging New York City to tropical forests

The New York Times recently reported on a project proposed by a Manhattan architectural designer and sustainable-development consultant to help maintain the Brooklyn Bridge boardwalk, which currently consists of 11 000 planks of tropical wood. The designer suggests soliciting donations, from US$1000 per board, in exchange for burnishing the donor's name into the board. The donations would finance a project endowment and stewardship for a 5000 acre (2000 hectare) forest in a tropical country to be selected. The wood for the boardwalk and future replacements would come from the project forest which would be sustainably managed and protected using the donor funds generated by the scheme. The idea (known as the Brooklyn Bridge Forest) is facing some stiff criticism however, since it goes against New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's initiatives against using tropical timber in public infrastructure. However the scheme's proponents state that it allows natural timber to continue to be used for the boardwalk while providing a way to sustain a forest while using its resources and raising awareness of the environmental impact of infrastructure projects.

Indonesia to ban export of illegal timber

The Jakarta Post reported that the Indonesian government began the implementation of a ban on exports of illegally harvested wood and wood products in early September as part of its moves to sign a Voluntary Partnership Agreement with the EU under its FLEGT scheme. The new rule makes it mandatory for forestry companies to obtain official certificates to verify that timber has been legally sourced from forests. These actions were deemed necessary since official statistics show illegal logging activities have been

destroying more than 1 million hectares of forests each year. Hadi Daryanto, Indonesia's Director General of forest product development at the Forestry Ministry stated, "If a source of timber is untraceable, it will be categorized as illegal and byproducts will be ineligible for export to markets in the EU". The Timber Legality Verification System (SVLK) would be applied within industrial forest concessions. The new requirement was issued after the European Parliament recently voted to ban the sale of illegally harvested timber and timber products in the European market. The EU regulation banning importation of illegal timber is expected to be fully in place by 2013.

Forest carbon estimates too high?

Carnegie Institution's Department of Global Ecology and the World Wildlife Fund in coordination with the Peruvian Ministry of the Environment (MINAM) have made significant advances in accurate monitoring of carbon storage and emissions for the proposed United Nations initiative on Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) with high-resolution maps of carbon stored in tropical forest vegetation and released by land-use practices. The high-resolution mapping will significantly affect the implementation of REDD in tropical countries.

The study, which was published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences[2], was conducted in an area over 16 600 square miles (4.3 million hectares) of the Peruvian Amazon. The researchers mapped vegetation types and disturbance by satellite; used a LIDAR (light detection and ranging) system to develop 3-D maps of vegetation structure; converted the data into carbon density using field plots on the ground; and combined both satellite and LIDAR data to create high-resolution maps of stored and emitted carbon. The researchers used historical deforestation and degradation data with 2009 carbon stock information to calculate emissions from 1999-2009. The study found that carbon storage differed among forest types and with the underlying geology, even for areas within close proximity of one another. Forests growing on older geological surfaces hold about 25% less carbon than the vegetation found on younger, more fertile ground. This variability may affect previous estimates of carbon storage in tropical forests. For example, whereas the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reported that there is over 580 million tons of carbon stored in a particular study area in the lowland forest of Madre de Dios region, the findings from this study revealed the true figure to be a third less at 395 million tons.

Cocaine users stimulate deforestation

A recent report in Dialogo Ambiental stated that over 100 000 hectares of rainforest have been cleared to grow coca, the base plant for cocaine as well as a traditional highland stimulant, over the past 10 years. According to the report, deforestation has increased over the past four years, which has created problems not just for the Amazon but also for the rest of the country. In 2009 alone, over 15 000 hectares of rainforest may have been lost due to coca cultivation. Observers consider that Peru is now the region's largest coca grower, having surpassed Colombia.

Slow movement on "fast track" funding

Ministers and other high level officials made progress in September on establishing the details of how hundreds of billions of dollars in climate aid will be raised and distributed at a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. The meeting was held to clarify the status of the billions of dollars for climate mitigation and adaptation in developing countries pledged by developed countries in Copenhagen last December. The funding issue is ready to play a prominent role in the upcoming UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) in Cancun, Mexico this December. The Copenhagen Accord pledges US$30 billion in what is called "fast-track" climate funding from developed countries to support financing for developing countries to initiate action towards greenhouse gas reduction during 2010-2012, as well as long-term financing of US$100 billion targeted for 2020. It also calls on the developed countries to provide "new and additional resources" for the fund. However some countries such as the UK have stated that fast-track funding would be part of existing funding for overseas development assistance. The Copenhagen Accord is not binding since it did not acquire unanimous support from all signatories of the Climate Convention. Ministers from key countries such as Australia, China, South Africa and the UK were not present at the Geneva meeting, meaning that the issues dealt with there could well be on the table again in Cancun.

Deforestation falls in Brazil

The Brazilian government says that deforestation in the Amazon declined by 47.5% over the past 12 months, according to a preliminary survey by a low-resolution satellite. This is the largest decline since measurements began in 1988 and, if confirmed by data from a second set of satellites due out later this year, it would mark nearly a 90% drop in annual forest area lost from a peak in 2004. The Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE), Brazil's remote-sensing agency, said fires burned 229 600 ha between August 2009 and August 2010. That compares with 437 500 ha for the preceding 12-month period. Clearing was concentrated in the agricultural states of Pará and Mato Grosso. However, Brazil's low-resolution system, known as the Real-time Deforestation Detection System, detects only fires covering more than 25 hectares. Indeed, INPE specialists told the Brazilian press that farmers may now be employing smaller conflagrations to escape detection. The release of the data comes 1 month before a presidential election in Brazil, with the government crediting increased enforcement efforts, including cutting off loans to deforesters, for the improved figures. Analysts also pointed to recent efforts by large soybean and beef processors not to buy products from newly deforested areas as helping to slow the rate of deforestation. They note, however, that the global economic slump may also be playing an important role: if beef and soy prices were to rise, it's unclear whether Brazil could prevent deforestation rates from soaring once again.

2 *Asner, G.P.; Powell, G.V.N.; Mascaro,J.; Knapp, D.E.; Clark, J.K.; Jacobson, J.; Kennedy-Bowdoin, T.; Balaji, A.; Paez-Acosta, G.; Victoria, E.; Secada, L.; Valqui, M. and Hughes, R.F. High-resolution forest carbon stocks and emissions in the Amazon. http://www.pnas.org/content/107/38/16738.abstract*