



Environmental Audit Committee

Rt Hon. Steve Barclay MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

Sent by email only

Wednesday, 8 May 2024

The UK's contribution to tackling global deforestation

Dear Secretary of State –

The Committee appreciates the Government's considered response to its recent report on *The UK's contribution to tackling global deforestation*. The Committee values the Government's readiness to accept a number of its recommendations, including those on assisting Indigenous People and Local Communities' organisations and on the use of trade negotiations to encourage high environmental and social standards.

The Committee was nevertheless disappointed that the Government was not prepared to accept its substantial recommendations on widening the scope of Government Buying Standards to all public bodies, on bringing forward proposals to amend the UK Timber Regulations to require all imported timber to be sustainably harvested, and on amending paragraph 2 of Schedule 17 to the Environment Act 2021 to prohibit UK businesses from trading or using commodities linked to deforestation activity.

The Committee would be grateful for clarification on a number of issues raised by the response: these are set out below.

Recommendation 7. We recommend that the Government bring forward proposals to amend the UK Timber Regulations so as not only to prevent illegally harvested timber being placed on UK markets but also to require all imported timber to be sustainably harvested.

Recommendation 9. We recommend that, in order to increase the sustainable use of forest-risk commodities, the Government should bring forward amendments to paragraph 2 of Schedule 17 to the Environment Act so as to prohibit UK businesses from trading or using commodities linked to

deforestation activity as defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, whether or not the activity is permitted by local legislation.

The Government response to recommendation 7 made clear that the Government is utilising the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Regulations and associated Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) to improve the supply of verified legal timber to the UK market and that it plans to commence a review of the Timber Regulations in 2024. While these can be useful tools for ensuring that timber comes from legal sources, they do not ensure the production of these goods is sustainable.

The Government response to recommendation 9 highlighted the primacy of national and sub-national governmental decisions in management of their natural resources. The Committee generally agrees with this premise: it is important to support countries to eliminate the illegal production of forest risk commodities.

Nevertheless, while the UK must respect the laws of sovereign nations, it should not allow products produced in an environmentally-damaging and unsustainable way to have access to UK markets. Evidence the Committee received indicated that a legality-focussed approach could provide perverse incentives to producer countries to change their laws to legalise deforestation.

The Government response does not address directly the Committee's recommendations or our underlying concern at the potential of exporting countries to weaken or to repeal their own measures aimed at countering deforestation so as to facilitate access to the UK market.

Please set out the measures the Government has taken, or plans to take, to ensure that producer countries are not incentivised to reduce deforestation protections in national and sub-national legislation in order to increase access to the UK market.

Recommendation 8. We recommend that the Government publish its proposed suite of regulations as a matter of urgency. Where regulations are to be subject to the affirmative procedure, Ministers must publish a clear timetable for drafts to be laid, approved by both Houses and brought into force, to allow those businesses likely to be within the scope of the regulations sufficient time to prepare.

Recommendation 11. We recommend that the Government's proposals for due diligence legislation should include from the outset all forest risk commodities associated with a material UK deforestation footprint (soy, palm oil, cocoa, maize, beef and leather, rubber and coffee) rather than taking the phased approach which Ministers appear to favour. In the response to this report we expect the Government to set out the evidential basis for the claim that the commodities within initial scope are estimated to account for 64% of the UK's tropical deforestation footprint, and to indicate the proportion of the UK's global deforestation footprint estimated to be covered by these commodities.

In its response to recommendation 8 the Government has acknowledged the urgency for introduction of this secondary legislation, but will only commit to doing so "as soon as parliamentary time allows."

The Committee acknowledges that the Government response to recommendation 11 has provided a clarification of the calculations underlying the 64% value associated with the four commodities it has chosen to move forward with, and recognises the Government's approach to expediting the process of implementing the due diligence legislation.

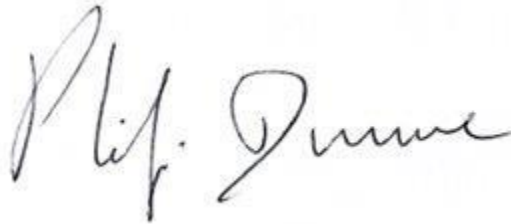
Evidence received by the Committee indicated that a phased approach to implementation would be likely to take a minimum of 18 months for a single commodity and up to four years for all seven commodities envisaged.

The Committee would be grateful for an assurance that the Government intends to bring forward the measures envisaged in your written statement to the House of 12 December 2023 before the end of the current Parliament, and for confirmation of the date on which the Government intends to bring the initial measures into force following the grace period for preparation which it proposes.

Given that the Government is adopting a phased approach, it would be helpful to know the projected dates on which the remaining commodities are to be brought into scope.

The Committee looks forward to discussing this and other matters with you at the evidence session scheduled to take place in June. To enable the fullest possible discussion of these issues, I would be grateful if you would arrange for the Committee to receive a response to this letter not later than Monday 3rd June.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Philip Dunne', is centered on the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Philip' and the last name 'Dunne' clearly distinguishable.

Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee