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Tropical protection

After years of talk, the palm-oil industry is looking into adopting environmental standards. Such rules must be strong, and need to be implemented.

More than 100 major companies worldwide have made commitments to promote the use of environmentally sustainable palm oil over the past few years. This is to their credit. Palm oil finds its way into everything from food and cosmetics to biofuels, but the expansion of palm plantations has driven widespread deforestation — as well as carbon emissions — in places such as Indonesia and Malaysia. To various degrees, companies that trade in palm oil have promised to halt the use of oil from newly cleared land, but implementing such goals is not easy. The latest attempt to create workable standards comes from an industry consortium in consultation with a team of respected scientists. Their report is due out in December, and a draft is available for public comment until 31 July (see go.nature.com/rt7fue).

This High Carbon Stock (HCS) Study was formally launched last year, when five leading palm-oil producers, including Sime Darby in Kuala Lumpur and IOI Corporation Berhad in Putrajaya, Malaysia, signed the Sustainable Palm Oil Manifesto. That document commits signatories to halting the expansion of palm plantations in dense forests where carbon emissions would be highest, but says that the palm-oil industry cannot focus solely on environmental issues. Environmentalists immediately accused the companies of seeking to undermine attempts to produce a stricter set of guidelines, and to delay obvious solutions with complicated science.

There is some truth to this, but the merits of a given project do depend in part on the social and economic context in which it is situated. Decisions about land use are rarely made on the basis of environmental criteria alone, and many of the regions in which the plantations are located — or will be located — would see social and economic benefits from an orderly palm-oil industry.

The question is where to draw the line. Most would agree that it does not make sense to tear down old-growth forests, which store a lot of carbon and are home to a diverse array of plants and animals. The same could probably be said for selectively logged forests, where only the biggest and most valuable trees have been taken, which are still high in carbon and biodiversity. Everybody agrees that it would be wise to focus development on abandoned land that has already been fully cleared, and so has little carbon or biodiversity to speak of; in such areas, a palm plantation could increase the carbon stock, thereby alleviating global warming. In between, on degraded and heavily logged forests and in areas where forests are actively regrowing, there is more room for debate.

The current draft of the HCS Study report seeks to create a framework for evaluating projects on the basis of both land type and socio-economic conditions. It proposes classifying land according to the state of forests: at the extremes, green represents the go-zone, such as already cleared land, and red the no-go zone, where primary forest remains. In the centre is ambiguous amber, a middle zone in which trade-offs are possible. If the social and economic benefits are high enough, perhaps a small hit to the climate is acceptable and could be offset by protecting additional land elsewhere. The first step in making such decisions is to get data on forest cover, and the study advocates mapping land with both high-resolution satellites and aircraft-based lasers to gather detailed measurements of forest structure.

Confusingly, before the HCS Study launched, major environmental groups were engaging the industry in separate negotiations known as the High Carbon Stock Approach. Those talks intended to create a more conservative set of guidelines that often default to the red no-go zone when it comes to development. The HCS Study consciously goes in the other direction, acknowledging that there may be cases in which natural forests could be converted to plantations in the name of alleviating poverty. "This is the essence of the 'quid pro quo' explored in this Study," the authors write.

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Ultimately, the industry must to find a way to promote both environmental protection and social well-being. Finding the right formula will not be easy, but it is a sign of progress that all sides are seeking a solution. In theory, this is the duty of government, but governments across the tropics have had a hard time controlling rampant development that has left many citizens behind. It would be a step in the right direction for environmentalists, scientists and businesses to agree on a set of meaningful standards. Then it would be a matter of ensuring that companies keep their word. ■

Secret service

Government labs should be subject to the same transparent oversight as academic facilities.

The 'overabundance of caution' used by national defence and security agencies can border on the ridiculous. US government paranoia over terrorism led to the generally despised — and questionably effective — airport rituals of prohibiting bottles that contain more than 100 millilitres of most liquids and subjecting all passengers to radiation in a virtual strip search. Public panic led to similarly overblown US responses to the 2014 Ebola outbreak, including the forced quarantine of people who were never exposed to the virus and had no chance of causing an epidemic (see page 502).

How, then, was the US Department of Defense (DOD) able this year to send live anthrax spores across at least seven international borders and to at least 183 labs without the authorities noticing? If there is anywhere that paranoid officials should want to monitor when it comes to anthrax, it is the DOD. After all, the DOD works with more anthrax than any other institution, and the only known bioterror