
European Ecolabel's greenwashing of Asia Pulp and Paper must stop

The European Commission claims that the EU Ecolabel is only awarded to “the very best products, which are kindest to the environment”. But when the EU Ecolabel has been awarded to Golden Plus and Lucky Boss, two brands of photocopy paper manufactured by Pindo Deli, a subsidiary of Asia Pulp and Paper, this claim is greenwash.

“EU Ecolabel allows forest destruction: The case of Pindo Deli,” is the title of my latest report, recently published by FERN. Despite the EU Ecolabel, which was awarded in 2006, the logging and plantation operations associated with Pindo Deli are extremely destructive and in some cases may not even be legal under Indonesian law.

Pindo Deli is a paper manufacturing company with two paper mills in West Java, producing around one million tonnes of paper products a year. Around 80 per cent of the pulp used in Pindo Deli's paper mills comes from two massive APP pulp mills in Sumatra: Lontar Papyrus and Indah Kiat.

Vast areas of forest have been cleared to supply the raw material to these pulp mills. Two forestry companies, PT Arara Abadi and PT Wirakarya Sakti (PT WKS), supply timber to the pulp mills. Both are part of the Sinar Mas Group, the company that owns Asia Pulp and Paper. PT Arara Abadi has an appalling record of human rights abuses, documented in detail in a 2003 report by Human Rights Watch, titled “Without Remedy”.

In November 2009, David Gilbert of Rainforest Action Network visited PT WKS's logging operations in Jambi province, Sumatra. Gilbert travelled to the edge of PT WKS's concession, bordering Bukit Tigapuluh National Park. “Private security forces turned us away,” he says. “Just beyond the gates, biodiverse lowland rainforests are being illegally logged by Asia Pulp and Paper.” Gilbert saw around 100 trucks leaving the forest, “headed to the nearby APP pulp and paper factory.” That factory is Lontar Papyrus.

About 10,000 people live in PT WKS's concession area, including about 500 members of the Orang Rimba indigenous group. The Orang Rimba's livelihoods are being devastated by PT WKS's logging operations.

A 2008 report by a group of NGOs, including WWF Indonesia, found that PT WKS was logging in an area of forest where orangutans had recently been re-introduced. The NGOs documented the destructive logging and questioned whether PT WKS's operations in Bukit Tigapuluh were legal.

APP's operations are so controversial that even the Forest Stewardship Council will have nothing to do with the company. In December 2007, FSC issued a statement “dissociating” itself from APP. “There is substantial publicly available information,” FSC wrote, “that suggests that APP, a Sinar Mas subsidiary, is associated with destructive forestry practices.”

I tried to find out how on earth the EU Ecolabel could have been awarded to a company involved in this level of destruction. To get the Ecolabel, Pindo Deli had to convince one of the EU's “Competent

Bodies” that it complied with the Ecolabel's criteria. In this case, the “Competent Body” was a French company called AFNOR.

I wrote to AFNOR to make a formal request for the assessment report carried out before the Ecolabel was awarded and any audits that had been carried out since the award. AFNOR declined to respond.

I wrote to Pindo Deli and APP to ask, among other things, what evidence the company could provide that its raw material comes from “sustainable forest management”, as required to comply with the Ecolabel criteria. Pindo Deli and APP declined to respond, even when I sent a draft copy of my report and invited them to provide a comment and offered to include the comment as an annex to the report. APP did respond after the report had been published, but failed to address the allegations of destructive logging operations in the report.

I wrote to the European Ecolabel Helpdesk to ask what information about the assessment is publicly available. None, it turns out. “I doubt that the assessments are available to the public since it might contain private information, for example regarding the composition of the products, that producers might not want to disclose,” Camille Ouellete from the Helpdesk told me. “Unfortunately, I fear you will not be able to obtain those documents,” she added.

Benjamin Caspar at the European Commission's environment department told me that “I don’t think that French CB [Competent Body] can give any information to external parties and not even sure if the Aarhus convention [on access to information] is applicable in this case.”

ENDS Daily (a news service covering European environmental issues) reports that the European Commission's environment department will ask AFNOR to investigate and “act in response to these severe accusations”. Whether AFNOR's investigation will be made public, however, is not clear. “When licenses are found to be in breach, which happens occasionally, they are taken away immediately,” the environment department told ENDS Daily.

There is little doubt that APP's operations are not sustainable, nor do they comply with the EU Ecolabel criteria. EU's greenwashing of this destructive company should stop. The EU Ecolabel should be withdrawn from Pindo Deli's photocopy paper.

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The report “EU Ecolabel allows forest destruction: The case of Pindo Deli” is available here: <http://fern.org/node/4684> (pdf file 1.26 MB)