

Science for Environment Policy

Wood from illegal harvesting in EU markets estimated

Illegal timber imports into the EU were between 8 and 18 million m³ in 2009, representing 6-13% of total imports, new research suggests. Although figures for illegal logging are associated with high uncertainties, the authors claim that these figures provide the best available estimates for policy and decision makers.

Illegal logging is a worldwide problem, which exacerbates climate change and devastates valuable habitats. It also undermines the economic viability of sustainable [forestry](#), discouraging environmentally-friendly forest management. To combat such harmful practices, the EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade¹ (FLEGT) Action Plan was adopted in 2003 and subsequently the EU Timber Regulation², prohibiting the trade in illegally-logged wood, came into full application in March 2013.

Quantifying levels of any illegal activity, including illegal logging is complicated. Estimates of the amounts of illegally-harvested wood are often based on speculation or uncertain data and processing of illegally-logged wood may occur in a third country, obscuring its origins. Moreover, there is no internationally agreed definition of 'illegal logging'. For example, some studies have used narrow definitions, such as any logging in violation of trading agreements or harvesting within protected reserves, but others use broader definitions, designating logging as illegal if any national laws have been broken at any time during the harvest. These problems mean that estimates of illegal logging can vary widely between studies.

In this study, researchers modeled the domestic supply of wood (using the Food and Agriculture Organization's Forestry Statistics Database) and international trade (using the UN's trade databases). Estimates of illegal logging for individual countries were based on previously gathered data. Illegal logging was defined as: logging in national parks or reserves; harvesting without permits or more than the permits allowed; failing to report logging to avoid payments or taxes; and violating international trade agreements.

This methodology incorporates not only trade between two countries but also 'third party' trading, when illegal wood is imported and processed in one country and subsequently sold on to another. Accounting for these complex trading links can provide a good framework for calculating estimates of trade in illegal wood, say the authors.

The results suggest that imports of illegally logged timber into the EU in 2009 amounted to between 8 and 18 million m³. These estimates were based on the EU as a single entity, i.e. only illegally logged timber from countries outside the EU that was imported into Member States was included, movement of illegal wood into one Member State from another was not considered an 'import'.

When trading between Member States was considered, the estimates of illegal imports rose to between 15 and 34 million m³ (3-6% of the total). Roughly half of this was the result of direct trade between countries; the other half was via a third country and subsequently sold back to Member States.

Illegal logging of forests within the EU was estimated at between 5 and 10 million m³. The total amount of wood illegally-harvested worldwide was between 103 and 284 million m³, in the same year.

The researchers stress that there is a high level of uncertainty associated with their results, and any use of these figures should take this into account. However, they conclude that the methodology is a step towards providing results that can be understood and reviewed, and currently provides the best available estimates.



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1. See: www.euflegt.efi.int/portal

2. See: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eutr2013/index_en.htm