

N.Y. climate summit may give forestation projects some momentum

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Forests and their role in reducing global carbon emissions will get their time in the limelight at next week's U.N. Climate Summit in New York, sources involved in the meeting say.

Government officials, major corporations and indigenous communities are expected to band together and present a new vision of how to slow the destruction of millions of acres of tropical forests each year, a trend that currently contributes somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of annual greenhouse gas emissions worldwide.

"There's a buzz, I would argue, that progress can be made on the forest issues," said Craig Hanson, who directs the World Resources Institute's food, forests and water programs.

The summit is not part of the United Nations' climate negotiation process. Rather, it is intended to build political will toward curbing global greenhouse gas emissions in the months leading up to a 2015 international agreement in Paris.

To do so, the United Nations hopes that leaders in government, business and the nongovernmental organization community will use the summit to announce significant actions and initiatives to combat climate change, several of which are expected to address forests.

According to Nigel Purvis, president and CEO of Climate Advisers, forest preservation is increasingly recognized by nations as an easy and effective method to control global emissions. By reducing deforestation rates in the Amazon by about 75 percent since 2004, Purvis said, Brazil as a nation has made the single biggest contribution to emissions reductions in the world.

"It shows the potential for action in this area," Purvis said. "They don't need to invent new technologies to figure out how not to cut down trees."

A 'shared vision' for sustaining the world's forests expected

"We are in the midst of an exciting, dynamic transformation in the global efforts to conserve forests and to make agriculture more sustainable," Purvis added. "The least contentious, most forward-looking part of the climate negotiations has been on forests."

At the most recent U.N. climate negotiations in Warsaw, Poland, significant strides were made on a mechanism by which wealthier nations fund developing nations to keep forests standing instead of allowing them to be cleared for crops. Called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation

and Forest Degradation (REDD+), the mechanism remains controversial, but foundational agreements were made in Warsaw regarding its eventual implementation, including safeguards for communities living in tropical forests, verification of emissions reductions and the base lines from which deforestation reductions will be measured ([ClimateWire](#), Nov. 25, 2013)

At the summit, nations will be encouraged to drum up more financial support for REDD+ in their post-2020 climate change commitments, according to the United Nations' website. In turn, the United Nations hopes that tropical forest countries will announce priority actions to combat deforestation and restore degraded forests in their statements.

Governments in tropical forest nations have already made significant commitments to slowing deforestation. Among the most recent was the Rio Branco Declaration in August, in which subnational leaders agreed to reduce deforestation by 80 percent by 2020 if they are provided with sufficient funding to do so ([ClimateWire](#), Aug. 14).

One of the summit's major events will be the unveiling of the New York Declaration on Forests, which, the United Nations says, "lays out high-level goals to address deforestation and promote restoration and will be endorsed by countries, companies, indigenous peoples and civil society organizations."

Stakeholders will be able to sign the New York Declaration until the 2015 Paris conference. Sources were unable to provide further details on what the declaration may entail. It will be formally announced on Sept. 23, Purvis said.

But Purvis would say that that summit participants can expect "an articulation of a shared vision for making progress on forests with specific targets and timetables for reducing emissions from deforestation," with both the private sector and indigenous forest communities taking part in that vision.

More corporate zero-deforestation commitments

The private sector is expected to play a key role in other areas of the summit, as well.

Much of global deforestation is linked to the production of lucrative agricultural commodities like palm oil, soy and beef in tropical regions. A recent report by environmental group Forest Trends found that between 63 and 75 percent of global deforestation takes place to make way for commercial agriculture, and of this, 36 to 65 percent is illegal ([ClimateWire](#), Sept. 11).

But across the agribusiness supply chain, more companies, especially those that deal in palm oil, are attempting to disassociate themselves from images of clearcut rainforests and smoldering peatlands.

Partially thanks to the recent proliferation of zero-deforestation agreements in the private sector, such as those by oil palm giant Wilmar International Ltd. and Cargill, similar actions by nations, companies, financial institutions and other stakeholders are expected at the summit.

"I think we're going to see a bunch of major corporations come out and reaffirm or take commitments to get deforestation out of commodity supply chains," said Steve Schwartzman, director of tropical forest policy at the Environmental Defense Fund.

Representatives from indigenous forest communities will also attend the summit to ensure their voice is heard -- some of the primary controversies surrounding REDD+ involve ways to ensure the legal rights of people living in tropical forests are protected, even as their home becomes a possible commodity in the carbon market.

A recent analysis by the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) found that forest communities are highly effective in protecting the forests they live in. Forest communities hold rights to 1.27 billion acres of the world's forested land -- land that sequesters 41.5 billion tons of carbon, WRI found ([ClimateWire](#), July 24).

According to Juan Carlos Jintiach of the Coordination of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), he and other representatives for indigenous groups will be taking this message to global leaders at the summit.

"They need to recognize how much indigenous people are doing to preserve this planet," Jintiach said.