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US-China Pledge to Ban Imports Emanating from Illegal Deforestation:  
No Time for A Mirage

London/Washington, D.C. - The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow brought renewed attention to fighting deforestation and forest degradation. On November 10, 2021, China and the United States, the two largest emitters of carbon, issued a joint declaration to enhance climate action in this decade. In Article 10 of the declaration, the two nations pledged to “engage collaboratively in support of eliminating global illegal deforestation through effectively enforcing their respective laws on banning illegal imports.” This landmark commitment seems to affirm that existing Chinese laws can effectively be used to combat illegal imports related to deforestation, including illegal timber. If so, the deceivingly simple wording adopted in Glasgow could have a profound positive impact on the forests of the world.

The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) welcomes this declaration. Through its in-depth investigations, EIA has exposed for over three decades in more than 25 countries, how illegal logging and illicit timber trade contribute to degradation of forests, deforestation, and devastate local ways of life, while causing irreparable damage to our climate. China is today the world’s largest timber importer and according to several estimates, probably the world’s largest importer of illegal timber. Faith Doherty, Forest Campaigns Lead (EIA-UK) said: “Thus far China has not taken significant measures to curb these illegal and tainted flows. And because China is also the largest global manufacturer and exporter of timber products, all markets buying such products from China are de facto exposed to the high risk that their goods contain illegal timber.”

Recently, Chinese legislators announced a revision of the Forest Code, laying the foundation for what could be an effective system to curb illegal timber imports. But as we previously pointed out, the law still lacks clarity on whether it applies to imported timber. As of November 10, this question could be settled by Article 10 of the joint declaration; the relevant Chinese administrative agencies are encouraged to take action banning imports of illegal timber.

Beyond deforestation caused by the illegal timber trade, there is an urgent need for joint global action to halt the trade of commodities tied to deforestation. China, the European Union (EU), and the US are by some estimates the world’s first, second, and fourth largest importers of deforestation-linked commodities. Lisa Handy, Director of Forest Campaigns (EIA-US), said: “The bipartisan FOREST Act,
recently introduced in the US to stop the importation of commodities linked to illegal deforestation, offers an additional approach for pragmatic cooperation between the US and China." The European Commission has also proposed new legislation to address this trade. If the joint US-China declaration at Glasgow is any indication, China - the largest importer of some key deforestation-linked commodities such as soy and beef - appears to have growing political will to tackle the biggest drivers of deforestation.

While this takes place at a low point in US-China relations, and both countries face a number of high-stake and high-priority domestic issues, the announcement of this joint commitment is encouraging. It is therefore of critical urgency to agree and embark upon a clear path for implementation as soon as possible. Looking for this effective and pragmatic path forward, EIA invites both administrations to look critically at and learn from the mixed results obtained under the Memorandum of Understanding on Illegal Logging and Associated Trade, including the need to establish concrete targets and measures with binding timelines. The world’s forests and the people who depend on them, and the millions of lives who will be crushed by the climate crisis have no time for another mirage.