



# US scientist: 'Roads and corruption' are big drivers of deforestation



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*“Roads and corruption are common enabling conditions for the loss of tropical forests and other high value conservation areas,” says Keith L. Kline from the prestigious Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the US. [Ryan Woo/CIFOR]*

To be effective, forest conservation initiatives must be rooted in a local context – including the land ownership and tenure ecosystems in which they operate, says Keith Kline, from the prestigious Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the US.

Keith Kline is one of those scientists obsessed with academic rigour. A distinguished researcher at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, he only accepted to be interviewed on condition that his answers be made in writing.

The result is a 6-page Q&A, complete with an equal amount of footnotes and references to scientific work, which can be consulted [here](#).

At ORNL, Kline specialises in climate change, forestry and bioenergy. But he is more than a mere bookworm. For 25 years, he lived in Latin America and Africa, where he worked on sustainable development projects including forest management, protected area planning, and biodiversity conservation.

What he brought back from there is a conviction that “land management decisions must be made locally,” taking into account the local circumstances – both environmental and human.

“Twenty-five years of fieldwork, living in developing nations while trying to help them slow tropical deforestation, taught me that it is not the product (beef) or the land cover (pasture) that cause deforestation but rather a combination of” different factors, he told EURACTIV.

According to Kline, those factors include policies and institutions, as well as types of economic activity, transport accessibility, land speculation, and markets.

“Roads and corruption are common enabling conditions for the loss of tropical forests and other high-value conservation areas,” he said when asked about EU plans to ban palm oil in transport fuels.

“Those drivers must be addressed locally and early if forests are to be conserved,” he stressed, adding: “it is critical to involve all relevant stakeholders in a process that identifies high-conservation value areas and develops plans for their management.”

At worse, he says, initiatives taken by wealthy nations to halt deforestation in tropical countries can even end up being counter-productive.

“In many contexts, simply declaring forest areas off-limits is less effective than other options,” Kline said.

EU policymakers have decided to phase out palm oil imports in a bid to halt deforestation in places like Indonesia. And further measures are being considered under a biodiversity strategy expected to be published in the coming weeks.

The European Commission’s climate chief Frans Timmermans has made forest conservation and restoration one of the key aspects of the European Green Deal, which aims at reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

“We need a strategy for reforestation,” Timmermans told lawmakers during his confirmation hearing in the European Parliament, saying the EU’s approach will focus not only on European forests but also on other places like the Amazon.

“We will need an international approach” to tackle deforestation, Timmermans told MEPs, adding: “We will have to look at the products we import into the European Union, and convince them to make other products that do not need deforestation”.

However, Kline cautions policymakers against adopting sweeping measures without first identifying the underlying causes of deforestation. And that “requires a deep understanding of local context and site-specific processes that lead to forest degradation and changes in land cover,” he says.

Kline points to studies showing that government-backed economic development programs “have driven deforestation for centuries and involved many different types of commodities” including rubber, tea, rice, and palm oil.

And agriculture is far from being the only culprit, Kline said, pointing to extractive industries and large infrastructure projects such as dams and hydropower plants, ports, and railways which all contribute to deforestation.

Rather than import restrictions, Kline said forest conservation measures are more effective when they combine incentives for management, restoration, conservation, and monitoring in a single package.

“Singling out a specific commodity such as palm oil is unlikely to impact deforestation rates unless the root causes are also

## **US wood pellet exports**

Another example is EU imports of wood pellets, which scientists and NGOs have singled out for causing deforestation outside of Europe – including the US – and exacerbating climate change.

According to Kline, those concerns “may reflect a lack of understanding of land ownership and management dynamics” in the US Southeast where wood pellets represent “less than 5% of total removals”.

Kline points to data from the US Energy Information Administration showing that 80% of all feedstock for wood pellet production in the US is sourced from wood residues generated by sawmills and other industrial forestry activities – not dedicated fellings.

Moreover, he says “nearly all commercial forest harvests in the Southeast occur on private timberlands” which could “transition to other crops or development” if denied the opportunity to export products to Europe.

At the end of the day, those alternatives could end up being worse in terms of deforestation and climate change than the production of wood pellets, Kline suggests.

“The future of these forests depends on local communities and landowners, underscoring the importance of engaging local stakeholders in the process to identify and protect” high-value conservation forests, Kline said.

## **Certification schemes**

One way of promoting forest conservation are certification schemes such as the FSC label, which are commonly used by the paper industry and carton producers.

However, the plethora of sustainability labels currently in use makes them difficult to navigate. For instance, the European Commission has recognised 14 international certification schemes for biofuels that fulfil criteria such as forest and biodiversity protection.

Certification schemes typically rely on third-party verification and are linked to performance standards. But they frequently face

Asked by EURACTIV, Kline agreed certification schemes are no panacea – at least for the time being. “My experience in the field suggests that certification schemes alone, as currently implemented, are unlikely to improve sustainability or deter deforestation,” he said.

According to him, some producers may have the administrative capacity to fulfil the documentation needed to obtain a sustainability label. But smaller producers may simply lack the wherewithal while producers of uncertified products will enjoy a price advantage, he pointed out.

In the end, forests won't necessarily come out in better shape, Kline said. “Certification can make consumers feel better while the forests continue to decline because certification alone is unlikely to address the underlying causes of deforestation”.

**> *Read the full interview Q&A here.***

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