

Scientists Statement on the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil's Draft Revised Principles and Criteria for Public Consultation - November 2012

As leading scientists with prominent academic and research institutions around the world, we write to encourage the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) to use this review of the RSPO Principles and Criteria as an opportunity to ensure that RSPO-certified sustainable palm oil is grown in a manner that protects tropical forests and the health of our planet. We applaud the RSPO for having strong social and environmental standards, but palm oil cannot be considered sustainable without also having greenhouse gas standards. Nor can it be considered sustainable if it drives species to extinction.

Tropical forests are critical ecosystems that must be conserved. They are home to millions of plant and animal species, are essential for local water-cycling, and store vast amounts of carbon. When they are cleared, biodiversity is lost and the carbon is released into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that drives climate change.

Moreover, tropical areas with peat soils store even larger amounts of carbon and when water is drained and the soils exposed, carbon is released into the atmosphere for several decades, driving climate changeⁱ. In addition, peat exposed to water in drainage canals may decay anaerobically, producing methane – a greenhouse more potent than carbon dioxide.

Palm oil production continues to increase in the tropics, and in some cases that production is directly driving tropical deforestation and the destruction of peatlandsⁱⁱ. Given the large carbon footprint and irreparable biodiversity loss such palm oil production cannot be considered sustainable.

We applaud the RSPO's initiative to reassess its Principles and Criteria every five years because as scientists, we recognize practices, just like scientific theories, must evolve to reflect that latest state of knowledge. Thus, it is critical that the RSPO work to ensure its Principles and Criteria reflect that latest peer-reviewed science and result in truly sustainable palm oil development. We support the RSPO's commitment to protecting human rights and continued work to strengthen social standards through the Principles and Criteria review. We encourage continued strong standards to preserve water waterways by maintaining riparian buffer, conserve soils by measures that reduce erosion, and protect highly-biodiverse forests, through the high conservation value assessments. We also encourage the RSPO to work with scientists and other experts to ensure that strong environmental standards are in place. Experts and our research can help determine best standards for the size of biodiversity corridors and riparian areas around waterways in different regions of the world.

We call on the RSPO to add two critical additional components to its Principles and Criteria during this review period:

1. A complete ban on future developments on peat.

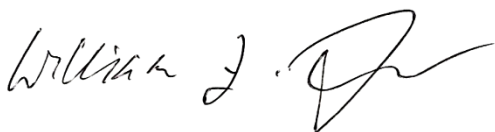
As noted above, palm production on peatlands result in a large amount of greenhouse gas emissions (both carbon dioxide and methane). Climate change has great potential to wreak havoc on natural and human made systems alike. Therefore, it is impossible for any activity that contributes large amount of greenhouse gas emissions to be considered sustainable. Banning further expansion on peat offers the best opportunity to drastically reduce emissions from palm oil expansion.

2. A ban on future plantings on high carbon stock forests.

We applaud the current RSPO Principles and Criteria for banning the clearing of primary forests and requiring a High Conservation Value (HCV) assessment that aims to protect HCV forests. The RSPO must go further to ensure that lightly and moderately disturbed secondary forests are also protected. These forests are still very valuable both for carbon storage and for biodiversity. A carbon threshold should be established to ensure that land use change remains carbon neutral, or in cases of grassland conversion, may result in net carbon storage.

It is vital that the RSPO add these requirements the Principles and Criteria immediately to ensure that all palm oil being sold with the label “sustainable” is not driving climate change and forest destruction. Without these critical requirements, RSPO standards are not enough for businesses to rely on to meet zero deforestation and low-carbon supply chain commitments and the standards cannot be considered truly “sustainable”.

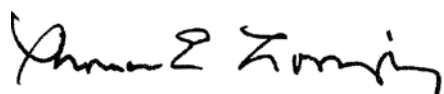
Sincerely,



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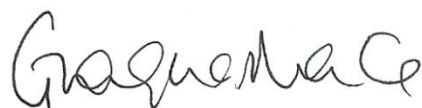
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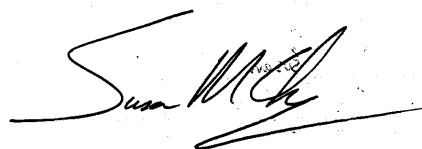
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ⁱ Chase, L.D.C., and I.E. Henson. 2010. A detailed greenhouse gas budget for palm oil production. *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 8: 199-214.

ⁱⁱ Kimberly M. Carlson, Lisa M. Curran, Gregory P. Asner, Alice McDonald Pittman, Simon N. Trigg and J. Marion Adeney. Carbon emissions from forest conversion by Kalimantan oil palm plantations. *Nature Climate Change*. 2012.