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Call for Leadership Issued on Forests and Climate Change

Broad Array of Non-Profit, Industry and Elected Leaders join Nobel Laureate to Urge Tropical Forest Protections in U.S. Climate Legislation

WASHINGTON, DC – Protecting tropical forests is an essential strategy in the fight against climate change, and the United States must take a leadership role on the issue, a unique alliance of leaders from the political, environmental, development and business communities declared today. In a unified voice, CEOs and presidents of international conservation groups, poverty and development organizations and American industry joined Senators John Kerry and Richard Lugar in calling for Congress to include strong tropical forest protection measures in U.S. climate change legislation.

The burning and clearing of the world's tropical forests causes roughly 20 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, which is more than the combined emissions of all the cars, trucks, airplanes and trains on Earth. Allowing deforestation and degradation to continue would undermine all other efforts to combat climate change, including capping CO2 emissions, increasing renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency, the group said.

Presenting their multi-sector Call for U.S. Leadership on Forests and Climate Protection on Capitol Hill were a dozen of the leading voices on climate change, human development and the U.S. economy. The Call for Leadership has already been signed by more than 30 of the world's leading corporations, elected leaders, nonprofit organizations and policy experts. Full text and a list of signatories are available at www.adpartners.org.

The event marked the first such multi-sector call for a common policy approach on forests and climate change, and the participants emphasized both the uniqueness and urgency of the moment.

In her opening remarks, Nobel Laureate and founder of the Greenbelt Movement Wangari Maathai (www.greenbeltmovement.org) noted, "We need the U.S. to provide the leadership and I am most encouraged by the prominence President Obama has pledged to give climate change. If the U.S. doesn't come forward, everyone else will hide behind you."

Both the House and Senate are developing climate legislation, and many observers expect bills to come to the floor in coming months. Carbon "offset" programs, which allow emitters to fund carbon-reducing projects like avoided deforestation in order to meet part of their carbon reduction obligations, are being considered for inclusion in both chambers' legislation.

Sens. Kerry (D-MA) and Lugar (R-IN) emphasized that climate legislation must recognize and embrace forest protection's immediate relevance to human health, development and security.

Senator Kerry noted that, "Tropical deforestation must be a part of the debate on both climate change and national security. Around the globe, millions of people have seen their land and livelihoods degraded by deforestation, increasing instability in already troubled regions. At the same time, deforestation continues to release billions of tons of carbon dioxide, accelerating the worldwide climate changes already occurring. America must set the tone for the rest of the world by including smart, effective forest protections in our own climate legislation this year and working to include international forestry provisions in the next international climate change agreement."

Senator Lugar added, "Deforestation is a critical national security challenge because of its connections with threats from climate change and food security. I hope the United States will show leadership in elevating these issues during the upcoming international climate negotiations."

In a panel discussion of the issue, leaders from the environmental and development communities joined leading industry voices to stress the central role of forests in both combating climate change and improving the economic viability of climate legislation. They also called for the inclusion of social standards and safeguards in any U.S. climate legislation in order to protect the rights and interests of forest-dependent communities, and ensure their prior informed consent and equitable sharing of benefits.

Dr. Helene Gayle, president and CEO of CARE (www.care.org), said, "Many poor and marginalized groups depend on forest resources for their livelihoods. Efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will pay enormous benefits in the long-run, but only if the gains also accrue to the indigenous and other forest-dependent communities. To foster this cooperation, the U.S. and other Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change must uphold the rights of indigenous communities and help them safeguard their livelihoods."

Mark Tercek, president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org) praised forest protection as a cost-effective way of both protecting biodiversity and fighting climate change.

"The idea is to make good fast progress towards US and international carbon policy that promotes forest carbon offsets to protect and restore forests," Tercek said. "It's good for climate change, good for biodiversity, and good for economies around the world. Forests are being destroyed at rapid rates, and this solution will not be available to us if we wait too long. Forest protection is one of the most cost-effective methods available to fight climate change with the unmatched benefit of preserving biodiversity at the same time."

Industry executives emphasized the role of forest protection in corporate citizenship, not just in the United States, but around the globe.

Michael G. Morris, chairman, president and chief executive officer of American Electric Power (www.aep.com), said, "As a biologist I know that provisions to conserve tropical forests are an important part of a cost-effective climate strategy and should be included in new climate legislation. In 1997 our company, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, launched one of the earliest projects – and still the world's largest project – to preserve tropical forests. These types of projects reduce the cost of climate action while protecting biodiversity and alleviating poverty by strengthening local communities."

Ray Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org), noted the importance of forests in protecting some of the most climate-vulnerable populations, most of whom rely heavily on forests for their livelihoods.

“Reducing deforestation must be a vital part of our overall climate change strategy, and if done right, it can provide real benefits to forest-dependent communities and indigenous peoples in developing countries,” said Offenheiser. “To seize that opportunity, we must put the rights and livelihoods of those communities at the heart of our efforts.”

Marriott International (www.marriott.com), another U.S. company that has dedicated itself to preserving forests, also spoke out at the event. Arne Sorenson, CFO of Marriott International, stressed the company’s strong hope that the U.S. would uphold its environmental commitments.

“Marriott is integrating environmental sustainability into our business strategy. Preserving rainforests is a centerpiece of our efforts,” said Sorenson. “We hope that the U.S. will act on its renewed environmental commitments this year by including strong forest protections in any climate legislation to protect these essential resources and address climate change.”

Peter Seligmann, chairman and CEO of Conservation International (www.conservation.org) emphasized the many benefits that forests provide – both materially and in terms of security.

“We can’t prevent the most dangerous impacts of climate change without conserving the world’s tropical forests,” said Seligmann. “Forests provide vital resources such as fresh water, food and medicine, and habitat for more than half of all the species on Earth. The United States should be at the forefront of protecting these vital assets, which are important not only for stabilizing the climate, but for ensuring the long-term security of all nations, including our own.”

Frances Beinecke, President of the Natural Resource Defense Council (www.nrdc.org) emphasized the importance of cooperation and commitment between the U.S. and developing nations.

“The United States and developing countries should work together to protect tropical forests and fight global warming,” said Beinecke. “With a commitment from developing countries and strong support by the U.S., we can succeed in preserving these irreplaceable areas. When developing countries have the tools and incentives to protect their forests and firm limits are established on global warming pollution, we will avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis.”

Former chief U.S. climate negotiator Stuart Eizenstat noted that standards for forest carbon offsets are verifiable, highly credible and available as models for inclusion in U.S. legislation.

“By valuing carbon stored in forests, the United States can lead the way to solve global climate change and protect forests and the people and species that depend on them,” said Eizenstat. “We have learned tremendous lessons about how to implement trustworthy and verifiable forest carbon programs and widely agreed-upon standards are available. What is required now is for the United States to take up the mantle of forest protection so that it will serve as a model to the rest of the world.”

The event was organized by Avoided Deforestation Partners, which regularly convenes multi-sector conversations on forest protection and climate change.

The group's founder, Jeff Horowitz, noted that "Now is the time to take action. This event brought together those that can make a difference. We ask that we all work together to advance and implement a policy that will immediately begin to reduce carbon emissions on a global scale. The world is waiting."

About Avoided Deforestation Partners:

Avoided Deforestation Partners is an international network of leaders in carbon policy, finance, forestry, and conservation. Established in May 2007, AD Partners supports efforts to halt tropical deforestation by promoting policies that are robust, transparent, have real climate benefits and are equitable to all parties involved. To that end, AD Partners promotes the adoption of a policy framework that creates strong and efficient mechanisms that motivate investments from governments and the private sector to avoid further deforestation. A principal goal of AD Partners is to support policies that make protecting rainforest lands profitable so that the power of the markets can work towards forest preservation, not forest destruction. More information can be found at www.adpartners.org.

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