



Press release

NGOs stand united against illegal logging and call for better forest governance in Romania and for a response from Europe to help stop the trade in illegal timber

Bucharest, October 22nd 2015

In a press conference organized today by the Environmental Investigation Agency and supported by Agent Green, WWF-Romania, Greenpeace Romania and Nostra Silva, organizations called on Europe to support Romania with ending illegal logging and protecting the last remaining natural forests.

EIA presents its new report „Stealing the Last Forest: Austria's largest timber company, land rights, and corruption in Romania” showing hard proof of poor forest governance which results in large amounts of illegal wood being consciously accepted by Holzindustrie Schweighofer (HS), the Austrian company dominating the Romanian wood market and selling its products to 21 European states, much of it as wood pellets and briquettes.

Alex Gavan, the famous Romanian high altitude climber and environmental activist has joined the NGOs call to protect Romanian forests.

The EIA report presents a series of case studies around various locations in Romania showing that HS deliberately accepts and encourages illegal wood while speculating poor forest governance. The report also describes in detail the earlier EIA exposure of HS top management accepting illegal timber and offering bonuses for it. **“We estimate that at least 50% of all timber cut in Romania was illegally sourced in the past decade. In most cases of illegal logging investigated by EIA Schweighofer was the destination for the illegal timber. The certificates and statements presented by the company are being strongly challenged by the findings that we present in our report”**, said Alexander von Bismarck, Executive Director of EIA Global.

Agent Green has investigated and exposed in recent years a series of cases of illegal or unsustainable logging in national parks and other protected areas. In one of the situations a transport of wood from Retezat National Park was taped all the way till it entered the HS sawmill in Sebes after breaking several laws. The company had committed two years before to refuse wood from national parks.

„Organized crime structures facilitate the flow of illegal wood from Romania to the European and global markets. So until now the EU and national legislation was not able to stop illegal activities therefore buying wood products from many Romanian regions continues to present high risk. Europe's last Intact Forest Landscape is at stake, and two thirds of its virgin forests that are home to the largest populations of brown bears, grey wolves and lynx living in the wild.” said Gabriel Paun, President of Agent Green.

“Civil society needs a concrete and strong signal from the authorities on the practices of Schweighofer and the other major actors who massacred Romania's forests. They must be held accountable. Till now, the logging of these forests has been done by a diverse coalition, many politicians included. Saving these forests can only be done by the coalition of goodwill. By those people who love forests for the sound of leaves in the wind, and not for the sounds of money that can be made by their unsustainable exploitation. Forests aren't timber, wildlife is not game, and we are not few!”, said Alex Găvan, mountain climber and environmental activist.

A Greenpeace map on forest cover change in Romania between 2000 and 2011 shows that 280 thousand hectares of forest have been lost or degraded, at a staggering rate of 3 hectares per hour. A 2015 update of the map shows that forest loss continued at the same rate in 2012-2014. The reasons for this dramatic development are complex. One of the main threatening causes is illegal logging, and data obtained from Romanian institutions regarding illegal logging investigations show that only a fraction of forest crime is actually being discovered and registered by authorities, at a current increasing rate of 62 illegal logging cases per day. While data from the Ministry of Environment shows a



volume of 8.8 million cubic metres of illegal wood per year, control bodies only seize half a million cubic metres per year.

“No doubt, we have a forest crisis in Romania, the scale and impact of deforestation in Romania is dramatic. If forest loss continues like that, Romanian mountains will be unrecognisable in a very short term”, said Ionut Apostol, Campaigns Director at Greenpeace Romania.

WWF has filed a complaint under the European Timber Regulation (EUTR). The complaint is supported by EIA, Agent Green and Neuer Weg. The complaint is addressed to the Federal Forest Office, which is the responsible EUTR authority in Austria. This Directive came into force in 2013 and it prohibits placing illegally logged timber and timber products onto the EU market. A recent study by WWF revealed that, unfortunately, this regulation has not been adequately embodied in national laws throughout the EU and it furthermore contains numerous loopholes and exemptions and sees only derisory penalties for transgressions.

“Economic common sense, as well as the most relevant European and Romanian legislation are encouraging, in theory, the superior processing of the wood as close of the harvesting areas as possible, in order to create jobs, economic growth for the local communities and more relevant income for the state budget. In reality, since the ‘90s local superior processing has decreased step by step and local communities have benefited poorly from harvesting activities. The market became dominated by major actors, like HS, only interested in maximizing profits, ignoring the long term sustainability of forest ecosystems. They took advantage of the legislative gaps and created an economic model which assured that the most significant part of the revenues would be directed to the company profit”, said Magor Csibi, Director of WWF Romania.

Nostra Silva, a federation of forest owners from Romania, through its members, exposed the illegal practices of Holzindustrie Schweighofer ever since 2004. Numerous notifications have been finalized with prosecution indictments and arraignments, having proved that illegal logging was done under the pressure of contracts signed with Holzindustrie Schweighofer. Thousands of hectares were taken from their real owners and are currently property of Cascade Empire, Holzindustrie Schweighofer's division of acquisition of forestland. Now these properties are FSC certified.

“Corrupting the administrative system of property restitution has given the occasion to grasp land exactly to those who mostly contributed to the decay of Romanian society: politicians. For 25 years, over the state or private forest property right, politicians set themselves up as masters of the forests and gave themselves the right to arbitrarily conserve or destroy them. For 25 years nobody had the courage to take drastic action so that forestry personnel do more administration and less politics. For 12 years, in Romania there is a network depriving us of our forests. We can call it the Schweighofer network!”, said Bogdan Ioan Tudor Todoran, lawyer and president of Nostra Silva.

„Stealing the Last Forest: Austria’s largest timber company, land rights, and corruption in Romania” is available at <http://eia-global.org/campaigns/forests-campaign/stealing-the-last-forest/>

A Romanian summary of the report is available at:

http://eia-global.org/images/uploads/EIA_2015_Exec_Summ_Report_RO_WEB.pdf

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