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Reducing forest loss to tackle climate change is achievable but will require governments to make tough yet fair choices

High-Level Meeting on Forests and Climate, Sydney, July 23 – 25

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Frances Seymour, Director General, CIFOR

International efforts to assist developing countries fight climate change by reducing deforestation can succeed, but will require time, money and a willingness to take often politically difficult decisions, according to the head of a leading international forest think-tank.

Frances Seymour, Director General of the Indonesia-headquartered Center for International Forestry Research, is an invited speaker at the Australian Government's international High-Level Meeting on Forests and Climate, Sydney, July 23 – 25.

Other speakers on the summit's agenda include government ministers from overseas and Australia, including Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer and Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Malcolm Turnbull.

The international summit follows the Australian Government's launch earlier this year of a \$200 million initiative to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions caused by forest loss, especially in developing countries. It is estimated that land use change, especially deforestation in developing countries, contributes 20 percent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions.

Ms Seymour said Australia's world-class forestry expertise along with the \$200 million initiative means Australia is well-positioned to make a major contribution to enhancing the potential role forests can play in mitigating climate change.

"Australia can play a significant role in international efforts to mitigate global warming by helping neighbouring countries reduce forest loss," said the head of the center, which receives support from Australia's aid program and other international donors.

Addressing the causes of deforestation and the most promising solutions to the problem, Ms Seymour said national efforts in countries such as Indonesia to stem deforestation and reduce the rate of global warming can benefit from the assistance provided by international agencies and developed nations such as Australia.

According to Ms Seymour, Australian and other international initiatives to help reduce deforestation in developing countries such as Indonesia will be considerably enhanced by knowledge already available on tackling deforestation.

However, Ms Seymour cautions that having the knowledge about causes and solutions is not the same as implementing those solutions, which can be a challenging task for all players – governments, industry, and the broader community.

"To achieve any meaningful reduction in the rate of deforestation in developing countries will require governments in the north and south to be willing to make some unpopular, but far-sighted decisions that have political, economic, and budgetary implications," Ms Seymour said.

"The fact is, deforestation is driven by fundamental market failures and governance failures. We know these problems cannot be solved overnight, but we do know that steps can be

taken today that would make a big difference. But those measures will be resisted by people whose interests are served by the *status quo*.”

One example of the complex nature of the problem cited by Ms Seymour is the failure of markets to recognize and place a value on the less tangible goods and services forests provide.

“Tropical forests provide all sorts of benefits. They moderate water flows and provide a habitat for endangered species,” Ms Seymour said.

“But because the market finds it difficult to place a value on these kinds of services, the forest is undervalued compared to the cash that can be generated by converting forests to agriculture, and that causes deforestation.”

Governance failures are also an underlying cause of deforestation. “Communities living in and around forests often do not have recognized property rights to the forest products that are important to their livelihoods, and their voices are seldom heard in forest policy decision-making,” Ms Seymour said.

“At the same time, government ministries and local governments alike often lack the necessary authority, capacity, and accountability to fulfill their obligations to protect forests.”

According to Ms Seymour, research shows that behind what appears to a simple act of cutting down a few trees lies an intricate set of social, economic and political realities, which make deforestation a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Moreover, most of the causes do not operate at the level of a particular forest, but originate outside the forest from sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure development, and overcapacity in wood processing industries.

“The multi-sectoral causes of deforestation have been clearly documented. And workable policy responses exist, but few are implemented. That’s because those who would benefit include society at large and politically weak forest communities, while the losers would include well-connected elites,” Ms Seymour said.

“There is a risk that if new projects and policies are rushed forward, poor people could be made worse-off. For example, CIFOR’s research shows high profile crackdowns on illegal logging tend to focus on the little guy with the chain-saw, not the big guy with the swollen bank account.”

Ms Seymour said actions to address deforestation are political decisions that can be informed, but not determined, by scientific research. As a result, it is crucial that governments trying to reduce deforestation, along with the donor agencies assisting them, ensure all relevant stakeholders are engaged in building consensus on how to best optimize the role of forests in abating climate change. Achieving sustainable and just solutions will also require building the capacity of stakeholders both to understand the trade-offs, and to participate in the design and implementation of alternatives to address them.

“We have the tools and knowledge to put the brakes on forest loss, while still allowing people to enjoy the economic, social, and cultural benefits that forests provide” Ms Seymour said. “But until there is the political will to address the difficult market and governance failures that drive forest loss, deforestation will continue.”

The Center for International Forestry Research is an international research organization funded by donors around the world, including the Australian Government. In addition to its headquarters in Indonesia, CIFOR has regional offices in Africa and Latin America, and manages projects in another 30 countries. CIFOR is researching a range of forest and climate change issues in countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America. For interviews, further info, photos please contact:
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