Illegal logging takes 30 football fields a minute: why isn’t Australia acting?

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Most illegal timber ends up in developed countries, but Australia is reluctant to block its importation. AAP
A few years ago a friend of mine, Philip Fearnside, feared for his life. Phil had just flown into Manaus, Brazil, where he is a biologist and well-respected critic of illegal loggers and others who threaten the Amazon rainforest. He’d left his car in the airport parking lot, and he noticed a window was ajar. He was certain he’d closed it tightly.

For the next two hours Phil gingerly probed his car, eventually crawling beneath it to check for wires or bombs. He found nothing — a false alarm, he surmised.

But Phil was not simply being paranoid. Criminal gangs increasingly control illegal logging, and will kill those who dare to oppose them. In the Peruvian Amazon, for instance, a community leader alerted police to a truckload of illegal logs. Within an hour he was dead from six gunshots. The American nun Dorothy Stang, who fought to protect local communities in the Amazon from illegal loggers and land grabbers, was executed by hired killers. The legendary Brazilian conservationist Chico Mendes was also gunned down.

Illegal loggers in Myanmar send hundreds of millions of dollars worth of timber to China each year. AAP

These are but a few of the fallen. As documented in a recent report by the World Bank, “Justice for the Forests,” illegal logging is now a massive criminal enterprise, rivaling the illegal drug trade and robbing developing nations of up to US$15 billion in revenues annually. Of the 15 top timber-producing nations, two-thirds lose over half of their timber to illegal loggers, with some losing up to 90%.

According to the World Bank, it’s time to get tough with illegal loggers. In their new report they urge authorities to follow the trail of money, tracking down illegal timber barons with the same strategies used to catch drug kingpins and human traffickers.
The bank also wants law enforcers to use electronic surveillance, undercover operations and witness protection. It’s the only way, the report concludes, to combat international criminal syndicates and go after the big fish.

And it’s about time. The World Bank estimates that illegal logging causes or promotes the destruction of forest at a rate of 30 football fields a minute. This is an enormous threat to biodiversity and to local and indigenous cultures, and causes billions of tons of greenhouse gases to be spewed into the atmosphere each year.

According to the World Bank, if all the environmental and social costs are tallied along with the economic losses, the actual cost of illegal logging is around US$60 billion per year — a whopping figure.

It’s a problem that affects us all. As awareness of the crisis grows, industrial nations — which ultimately consume much of the world’s illicit timber, typically as wood products such as flooring, furniture and plywood — are taking measures to combat illegal timber imports. These include the European Union’s Timber Action Plan and new provisions to the Lacey Act in the US, which are putting teeth into measures designed to fight illegal imports.

In Australia, lawmakers have been debating a similar law for several years. Last month I briefed members of the Australian Senate on this legislation, the Illegal Logging Prohibition Bill 2011, which could diminish illegal timber and wood products flooding into Australia from places like Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and China.
Unfortunately, the Liberal-National Coalition, which originally supported the bill because it would help level the playing field for domestic timber producers, is now getting cold feet. Instead of passing it, the conservative Coalition has diverted the bill to a Joint Parliamentary Committee, even though there have already been two Parliamentary Inquiries in the past year on this exact policy. As a result, the bill is temporarily stalled and might eventually be weakened or even derailed.

This is bad news for anyone who cares about the environment and responsible commerce. In addition to the Coalition and its misguided policies, blame is due to former Australian trade ambassador Alan Oxley, who has lobbied hard against the bill. Oxley is now a well-heeled lobbyist funded by some of the world’s biggest timber and oil palm corporations, based in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

Last year I debated Oxley at Australian National University, in an event focusing on trade and forest conservation in the Asia-Pacific region. It was not a friendly encounter. Then, as now, Oxley argued that an illegal logging bill would be “anti-free-trade” and “green protectionism.”

But those arguments are bunk. The bill before Parliament won’t harm legitimate traders and timber producers — just those who profit from illegal logging. If the illegal logging bill falters, Oxley and the Coalition will have a lot to answer for, because Australia should be part of the solution to illegal logging, not part of the problem.

Dithering while the forests fall empowers the criminals that are plundering, bribing and even killing to enrich themselves with the proceeds from illegal logging. We have to fight this scourge. Australia is too smart and principled a nation to fail to do so.

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