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Group: China timber demand threatens world's forests

BEIJING, China (AP) -- China's rising demand for wood threatens to devastate timber stocks in countries from Indonesia to Russia, an environmental group said Tuesday, calling for more efficient wood use and measures to discourage illegal logging.

Although China still uses 17 times less wood per person than the United States, it is on course to become the world's top overall consumer within a few years, the World Wide Fund for Nature said in a report.

China imported about 1.5 billion cubic feet of timber in 2003, more than half of it from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia, according to the group, which is known in North America as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). It said imports are expected to triple to 4.4 billion cubic feet a year by 2010.

Logging bans imposed by China in its mountainous west after flooding in 1998 have decreased domestic supplies.

"Logging bans in China should not lead to forest loss in other parts of the world. Decisive action is needed to ensure that supply chains leading to or through China begin with well-managed forests," WWF International's director general, Claude Martin, said in a statement that accompanied the report.

China is now the second-biggest market behind the United States for timber, pulp and paper, but is expected to take over the top spot as its economy grows and demand for construction materials and furniture expands.

Increased Chinese demand could take a greater toll because the country is a major destination for wood that was illegally harvested or taken through unsustainable means such as by felling natural forests, according to WWF.

China could reduce the damage by developing environmentally sustainable forestry, recycling and taking other measures to reduce the amount of wood that goes to waste, the report said.

It said China and its suppliers could enforce measures such as tracing the source of wood imports.

"China will soon be leading the global wood market," according to Zhu Chunquan, director of the WWF's China forestry program. "We hope that it will also lead the efforts to safeguard the world's forests."

WWF, meanwhile, launched a project Monday aimed at ensuring that 1.2 million acres of forest are managed using environmentally sound practices by 2007, Zhu said. He said it also is meant to end the use of illegally felled wood by 30 key companies.

Zhu didn't mention any Chinese government involvement, but the success of the project would require official cooperation.

"The Chinese government has a high (degree of) commitment to the control of illegal logging," Zhu said. "China also has a high-level commitment to doing responsible ... business with other countries."

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