



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Timing is Everything: Sequencing Policy Interventions to Reduce Deforestation

How do we stop deforestation? The policy options are well-known, but the order in which they are introduced matters.

Background

The international climate community has increasingly focused attention on avoiding deforestation and land use change as an important mechanism for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. These nature-based climate solutions are considered a low-cost option for meeting climate targets. However, global forest loss was greater in the last decade than in the previous one despite a proliferation of commitments made by companies and governments to control it. Slowing tropical deforestation is possible through improved governance but requires locally adapted policies that are tailored to varied, regional social and political conditions. Improving governance requires a better understanding of how different actors and their interventions fit together at multiple levels of governance.

Once governments have set an agenda to reduce deforestation, the addition of incentives helps build coalitions that reinforce regulatory compliance and increase the political feasibility of more stringent policy. Without perceived legal risk and assured enforcement, subsequent incentives are less effective, for example, illegal deforestation acts such as land grabbing.

POINTS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- ▶ **Strategic policy sequencing can help overcome systemic barriers and has the potential to enhance initiatives and coordinate stakeholders toward zero deforestation.** Purposeful timing of policies can increase alignment among actor groups and agendas — such as reduced carbon emissions, biodiversity conservation, sustainable rural development, geopolitical control and zoonotic disease prevention — offering additional opportunities for multi-stakeholder forest governance.
- ▶ **Government regulatory measures need to be enacted early in the policy sequence to slow deforestation on frontiers.** States play a critical role in initiating the national zero deforestation agenda and creating an enabling environment with regulatory policies and incentives that support private sector commitments and increase legal compliance. The threat of sanctions, or ‘sticks’ enables more effective deployment of incentives, or ‘carrots’ later in the policy sequence.
- ▶ **Supply chain initiatives have limited effectiveness without complementary public policies.** Zero-deforestation supply chain initiatives help protect and restore forests on private lands. Governments provide important enabling measures that support supply chain initiatives, like formalizing land rights, legitimizing new governance structures, coordinating actors and monitoring compliance. This enabling environment is built upon a legal framework for forest protection, institutional capacity to enforce laws and a rearrangement of contradictory incentives such as certain agricultural subsidies.
- ▶ **Transnational governance alone is not capable of achieving zero-deforestation, but it can help states build the necessary institutional capacity to implement stronger commitments.** Success depends not only on the establishment, but also maintenance of a domestic enabling environment. Transnational actors provide a layer of stability against political shifts that may temporarily debilitate government action.

Deforestation interventions fall into three main categories: domestic public policies, international REDD+ financial mechanisms and sustainable supply chain initiatives. Combinations of these interventions work in tandem, for example, tropical nations advance public policies to reduce deforestation-related emissions under the Paris climate agreement while also leveraging international REDD+ finance and policy mechanisms. Companies that produce and source commodities in these countries seek to enhance their reputations and market access by committing to eliminate deforestation from their supply chains. A range of command-and-control and market-based approaches is required, but importantly, the order in which these interventions are introduced into a policy mix may matter.

To analyze the importance of timing in this governance mix, Stanford researchers examined patterns of policy sequencing in three Latin American countries that had pioneered strategies to reduce deforestation: Costa Rica, Brazil and Colombia. Their findings demonstrate that states play a critical role in initiating the national zero-deforestation agenda and that creating an enabling environment of command-and-control policies along with incentives which support private sector commitments is essential. Once launched, the zero-deforestation agenda is kept in motion and scaled up by a collection of transnational initiatives, nonstate actors and public-private partnerships. Transnational governance alone is not capable of achieving zero-deforestation, but it can help states build the necessary institutional capacity to implement stronger commitments. Success depends not only on the establishment, but also maintenance of the domestic enabling environment.

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This brief is based on the paper “**Policy sequencing to reduce tropical deforestation**” published in the journal *Global Sustainability*.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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