Soy

Position Paper

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One of a series explaining WWF's position on key issues impacting the world's forests

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Soy is a crop that provides both edible oil and livestock protein feed (soy meal). The global demand for soy is rising rapidly, driven by the growing need for livestock feed to satisfy the world's increased appetite for meat, chicken and dairy products. Most of the recent industry growth has taken place in the subtropical and tropical regions of Latin America. Recently, additional demand has originated from the bioenergy sector, which has identified soy as a potential alternative to replace fossil fuels for transport and energy, and by shortages of other edible oils used for food and fuel (such as rapeseed oil).

Having expanded on average 4.3 percent yearly from 1996 to 2006, the growth in the planted area of soy has direct and indirect impacts on natural habitats of high conservation value, the livelihoods of people and endangered species that depend on those habitats, as well as the global climate.

WWF recognises that soy meal and oil are basic commodities that generate income to farmers, processing industries, and support services, providing local employment and valuable foreign exchange earnings.

But soy production often carries high social and environmental costs due to indiscriminate forest clearing, loss of biodiversity, atmospheric, terrestrial and water pollution, and disregard for local community and indigenous rights. Soy production is usually capital intensive and large scale and in some cases has displaced smallholder subsistence crops. Conversion of High Conservation Value Areas (see WWF Position Paper on High Conservation Value Forests) and other critical habitats for soy cultivation is unacceptable as it threatens biodiversity, endangered species and the livelihoods of local people. It also hampers climate change mitigation, as forest conversion contributes to deforestation, which is responsible for about 15 per cent of all human induced global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that cause climate change. The conversion of forests to soy plantations in the Amazon is particularly threatening to the climate, as the forests of the Amazon contain 90 -140 billion tons of carbon, equivalent to 9 -14 years of current global, annual, human-induced carbon emissions.

WWF is concerned that the growing global demand for soybean and soy oil will create incentives for soy plantations to further expand into natural habitats with high conservation values. WWF also recognizes that an increase in soy production for bioenergy may have wider sustainability impacts, such as food shortages, food price increases, or displacement (bioenergy production displacing agricultural production and pushing it into other areas, causing a net expansion of the area under cultivation and associated forest loss).

WWF calls upon the industry, regulators, financiers, buyers and other stakeholders to work collectively to develop and promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable practices to minimise the negative effects of soy production and trade.

WWF believes that key elements of sustainability within the soy industry, regardless of the end use, are:

- **Maintenance of High Conservation Value Areas**: Soy plantations should not replace High Conservation Value Areas.
- **Balanced land use mosaics**: Zoning and infrastructure planning at a regional level should be used to integrate soy production into a mosaic of natural areas, agriculture and infrastructure, leading to a land-use plan negotiated and agreed with stakeholders. This mosaic should include a clearly designated permanent forest estate made of protected areas, production forests and areas under restoration.
- **Independently certified sound environmental and social management practices**: Industry participants should participate in the Round Table for Responsible Soy (RTRS), a global, multi-stakeholder process to develop better management practices and minimize impacts of soy production, such as air and water pollution, forest fires, soil erosion, pest invasion, human/wildlife conflict and biodiversity loss. Until the RTRS criteria are ratified, soy producers should produce soy according to the principles and criteria outlined in the Basel Criteria for Responsible Soy Production.
- **Respect for rights of local communities and indigenous peoples**: Industry participants should recognise the legal and customary rights of local communities and indigenous peoples to own, use and manage their lands, territories, and resources.

Plantation development should not proceed in areas over which there are unresolved tenure disputes.

- **Positive social impacts**: The industry should maintain or enhance the long-term social and economic well being of workers and local communities. In many cases this will include the strengthening and diversification of the local economy to avoid dependence on a single agricultural crop.
- **Strategies to avoid conversion:** Industry participants should achieve increased production without converting new forest land, while at the same time lowering overall environmental and socials impacts. Strategies recommended by WWF include increasing the levels of -production through the use of better management practices and establishing new soy fields on degraded and unused land.
- **Addressing displacement**: Governments and companies should work together to ensure that increases in soy production for bioenergy or other uses does not result in displacement of other food crops into natural areas with high conservation value. In addition to the strategies above, governments should establish functional and coherent land use, agriculture and rural development and energy policies that secure land allocation for food and fuel crops and reduce price fluctuations.
- **Positive GHG balance:** Soy plantations and processing plants should take measures to reduce GHG emissions, especially when the soy is designated for bioenergy uses. Industry participants should set standards for measuring life-cycle GHG balance to ensure that the bioenergy from soy delivers a positive GHG balance over fossil fuels. (See WWF Position Paper on Bioenergy)
- **Strong precautionary approach:** The soy industry should undertake a strong precautionary approach to evaluate the risks and consequences of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), and respect minimum standards for preventing damage to the environment and biodiversity, and to ensure the freedom of choice for farmers and consumers. (See WWF Position Paper on GMOs)
- **Proficient regulatory frameworks**: Regulatory frameworks should encourage practices that will achieve the desired environmental, social and economic outcomes described above. At a minimum, industry participants shall respect all applicable laws of the country in which their soy fields and crushing facilities are sited. However, responsible behaviour will often require standards of performance that exceed the requirements of local and national laws, especially where regulatory frameworks are underdeveloped or governance is weak.
- **Transparency**: Industry participants should adopt and make public their policies, practices and implementation plans pertaining to their social and environmental performance. They should encourage independent monitoring of their performance and make public their findings. They should involve local stakeholders both in the development of standards and performance monitoring.

WWF works with governments, private companies, financial institutions, and civil society organisations at the farm, landscape, national and global levels to:

- Identify, analyse and promote those better production practices that reduce the environmental and social impact of soy production to acceptable levels while being financially sustainable.
- Support of the Round Table on Responsible Soy through contributing to the development of robust and credible Principles and Criteria and urging active and constructive participation by companies in the soy sector.
- Identify and advocate for the removal of incentives for soy production that convert any natural habitats, replace high conservation value forests, degrade priority freshwater ecosystems or alter the natural conditions for biodiversity in these habitats.
- Identify areas that should be zoned out of soy production or protected in some other way due to their high conservation value or critical ecosystem functions.
- Promote responsible purchasing and investment policies in the soy sector.
- Invite retailers and consumers (especially in developed countries) to reduce their footprint on the world's forests by purchasing only products with sustainable soy.
- Encourage the establishment of new production areas on available degraded lands.

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