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FOREST LEGALITY ALLIANCE: TACKLING ILLEGAL LOGGING “FROM SEED TO SONG”



PETEN, GUATEMALA, 2015: Staff from Custosel, a community-based company that holds a forest management concession in the Peten, Guatemala, pilot-test the TreeTag app. Photo by Andrew Dudley, Earth Observation Inc.

Back in 2014, U.S. guitar maker and entrepreneur Tom Bedell had a problem. He needed to ensure that his raw material was from legal and sustainable sources to comply with his company’s “from seed to song” philosophy and brand. How could he demonstrate that the mahogany he was sourcing from Guatemala’s Petén rainforest was legally harvested? Furthermore, how could he be sure that the wood arriving at his workshop in Oregon was actually the same wood cut in the

Petén? Illegal logging — and fraud to cover it up — are not uncommon in remote places, and the paperwork accompanying timber shipments is often questionable.

Seeking a solution, Tom turned to a unique USAID public-private partnership, the Forest Legality Alliance (FLA). The FLA put Tom in contact with a California-based start-up with a mobile phone-based app called TreeTAG. The app provides a timber tracking system

that seemed to be just what Tom needed to trace his products “from seed to song,” so Bedell Guitars agreed to serve as the first TreeTAG pilot-test company. This support allowed the TreeTag team to begin designing a system that provided supply chain accountability for timber products and the forest communities that produce them. The Guatemalan government, which had recently launched a national-level online timber tracking system, has since signed a memorandum of understanding with TreeTAG and U.K.-based remote sensing company Astrosat to cooperate in testing technology applications to strengthen traceability.

USAID’s support for the FLA, entrepreneurs, and civil society working together to tackle illegal logging in Guatemala has leveraged resources, cooperation, and action worth many times USAID’s investment.

From Policy to Public-Private Partnerships

This story is just one of the many innovative partnerships and initiatives catalyzed by the FLA, which was created in response to the 2008 amendment of the Lacey Act, which made it a crime to import illegally harvested timber into the United States. By the end of the project in September 2016, USAID’s nearly \$6.5 million investment in the FLA will have leveraged more than \$13 million in in-kind and cash support. During its seven years of operation, the FLA has grown from 10 to 127 members, including major consumer goods and wood products companies, musical instrument manufacturers, and large and small non-governmental organizations, as well as certification, auditing, and service-providing bodies and companies.

Much of the FLA’s success can be attributed to its semi-annual Members’ Meetings, which have attracted not only the FLA private sector and NGO members but also numerous representatives of the United States and other governments, and international institutions such as the World Bank, International Tropical Timber Organization, and UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Going Global and Innovative

As other entities and countries, including the European Union and Australia, have adopted demand-side illegal logging legislation similar to the amended Lacey Act, supply-side countries such as Indonesia, Peru, and

nations of the Congo Basin have stepped up their own efforts to combat illegal logging. At the same time, global timber processing giants like China and Vietnam have also begun to accept responsibility for ensuring the legality of the global timber trade. Hence, the focus of the FLA has become more international and now includes close cooperation with relevant authorities and stakeholders in key timber trade countries around the world. To serve its growing number of stakeholders, the FLA has developed a series of practical tools to assist forest product companies in ensuring the legality of their supply chains.

For example, the FLA resources have enabled the development, field-testing and dissemination of innovative technologies to detect and prevent illegal logging and associated trade, which will continue after USAID support ends. The United States is a leader in the development of most of these technologies, which include everything from high-resolution remote sensing to drones; wood identification using DNA, near-infrared, and stable isotope methods; and a variety of approaches that adapt smart-phone and other technologies to more effectively track wood from forest to consumer.

Adaptations of approaches and activities pioneered by the FLA are being developed in Indonesia, China, Mexico, the Republic of Congo, Brazil, and other countries around the world. Though USAID’s support to the FLA is winding down in 2016, World Resources Institute has leveraged future support from a variety of donors to continue and build on the work and the partnerships that the Alliance has catalyzed. Illegal logging has yet to be eradicated, but the FLA has played an essential role in reducing this damaging practice. The FLA contributed to longstanding U.S. foreign assistance goals including biodiversity conservation, promoting a level playing field for legal forests products trade, and promoting good governance.

At a FLA workshop on supply chain traceability in early 2016, the FLA’s director played *The Song of the Jungle* on the first Bedell Guitar to be built from mahogany traced by the TreeTag system. Through support for collaborations like the FLA, USAID is supporting biodiversity through policy work, innovative approaches and partnerships with the private sector around the world.