

Analysis: The Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use

Context

At the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held on November 2, 2021, 124 countries signed the [Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use](#) (GDFL). The declaration, now endorsed by 141 countries in total, sounds a global clarion call to end and reverse deforestation and rapidly deploy a sustainable land-use transition by 2030. In addition to the GDFL, COP26 saw progress toward a better mobilization of forest-related climate finance through the creation of the [Global Forest Finance Pledge](#) (GFFP), which allocates USD 12 billion to reforestation policies and efforts to combat deforestation across 2021-2025. The pledges did not end with the GFFP, though: 28 national governments (including the TCB countries) committed to removing deforestation from the global supply chain of food and agricultural products. The so-called [Forest, Agriculture, and Commodity Trade Dialogue](#) (FACT) aims to promote sustainable development and trade while simultaneously protecting forests and ecosystems that might otherwise be threatened by agricultural activity. The GDFL, GFFP, and FACT come amid a renewed wave of governments and sub-state actors seeking to limit the rise of the global average temperature to below 1.5°C pre-industrial levels. Along with government these government pledges, a swath of financial companies joined the cause and pledged to end investments in activities linked to deforestation by the end of 2022. [The Commitment on Eliminating Agricultural Commodity-Driven Deforestation](#) (the structural machination of the companies' collective pledges) seeks to “use best efforts to eliminate ‘forest-risk’ agricultural commodity-driven deforestation activities at the companies, in [the signatories’] investment portfolios, and in corporate financing activities by 2025.”

Obstacles

The ambitious forest-related policy agenda established at COP26 should give cause for singular optimism... right? Well, yes and no: impressive pledges do not necessarily guarantee change, and if the state of past forest treaties (combined with the bleak trajectory of recent global deforestation trends) are to be litmus tests suggestive of future success, then all does not bode well for the health of the earth's forests.

The GDFL harkens back to—and, in some areas, improves upon—the [New York Declaration on Forests](#) (NYDF). An initiative commissioned by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Climate Summit in September 2014, the NYDF set out to end global deforestation by 2030. However, the recent sixth edition of the UN Development Program (UNDP) [NYDF Progress Assessment](#) indicated that the treaty failed to deliver on most of its key pledges. Alarming, global deforestation has increased since the endeavor's inception, and forest restoration has progressed at a slower pace than anticipated. Data collected by World Forest Watch (*Figures 1-3*) show that TCB members Canada and the United States were slow to achieve appreciable decreases in national deforestation rates, making substantial progress toward ending forest loss only in 2020. While deforestation in Canada gradually diminished over the 6-year period from 2014 to 2020 (notably decreasing in 2017 and

again in 2019), the most significant progress recorded to date occurred at the end of the decade. The U.S. witnessed even less momentum, with forest loss remaining relatively static from 2015 to 2019 and dwindling somewhat more markedly in 2020. Most concerning, however, is Germany's rate of annual tree cover loss, increasing from 21.2kha (changes in average hectares of deforestation) in 2014 to 187kha in 2020.

From 2001 to 2020, United States lost 42.2Mha of tree cover, equivalent to a 15% decrease in tree cover since 2000, and 16.3Gt of CO₂e emissions.

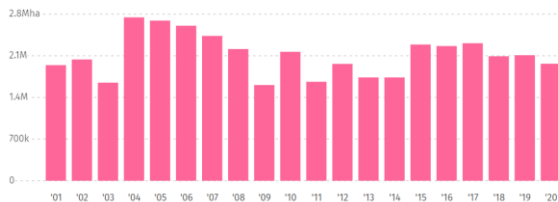


Figure 1: [kha in the U.S., 2001-2020](#)

From 2001 to 2020, Canada lost 44.1Mha of tree cover, equivalent to a 11% decrease in tree cover since 2000.

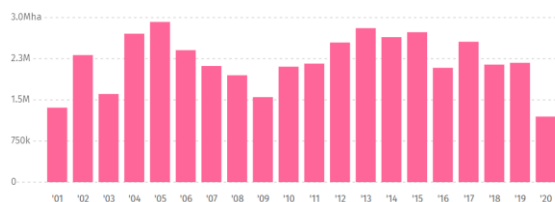


Figure 2: [kha in Canada, 2001-2020](#)

From 2001 to 2020, Germany lost 941kha of tree cover, equivalent to a 7.5% decrease in tree cover since 2000.

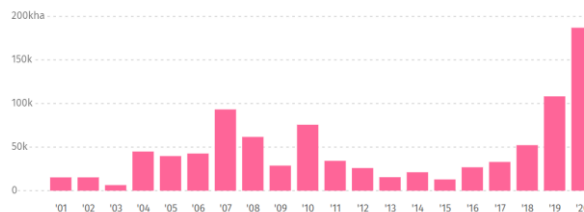


Figure 3: [kha in Germany, 2001-2020](#)

Although the multitude of financial and political pledges made in Glasgow offer hope for global forest stewardship, the UNDP assessment argues that, historically, public finance streams have amounted to a fraction of the funding needed to end deforestation and preserve earth's remaining tree cover. With that said, the scale at which national governments have taken up the GDFL is also worthy of note. Relative to the NYDF, which was backed by 40 countries during its functional lifetime, the GDFL has already garnered support from 124 countries—accounting for approximately 85% of the world's forests

Opportunities

While grudging but prudent skepticism is necessary to temper our expectations, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that new public finance commitments made in the GDFL may strengthen already existing efforts to stop deforestation by 2030 while creating still more momentum. Unlike the NYDF, which elicited modest, vague pledges from a handful of companies, the GDFL garnered support from 30 financial institutions, such as Boston Common Asset Management and Federated Hermes International, with over USD 8.7 trillion in assets under management. Should the value of forest-related ecosystem services become institutionally recognized on an international scale (which is possible given the UN Statistical Commission's adoption of the [System of Environmental Economic Accounting Ecosystem Account \(SEEA EA\)](#) in March 2021), the GDFL could be used to make formal acknowledgments actionable through mechanisms like the Paris Rulebook and provide a framework for understanding how public and private finance could be better allocated to preserve forest ecosystems. Similarly, impactful progress can be achieved if national governments continue to expand their efforts to combat deforestation, as did

Germany in 2019 when the country co-launched the PROGREEN initiative with the World Bank, which seeks to bolster and accelerate global campaigns to end deforestation, restore degraded lands, and reduce deforestation-related greenhouse gas emissions. The GDFL shines a glimmer of hope on a canopy of otherwise desiccated and moribund international forest policy; it is, therefore, paramount that the momentum reached at Glasgow holds, and that countries leverage COP27 to achieve impactful results for earth's rapidly shrinking forests.