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PRESS RELEASE

Liberia and EU review progress under legal timber trade agreement

Representatives of Liberia and the EU have met to review progress towards implementation of their Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA), which aims to ensure Liberia exports only legal timber products to the EU. The Liberia-EU VPA Joint Implementation Committee (JIC) met for the 3rd time on 20-22 January in Monrovia. The JIC is the body established to oversee the implementation of the agreement.



“I am really encouraged by the progress we have made in the implementation of this agreement since our last meeting,” said Sister Mary Laurene Browne, Chair of the Board of Liberia’s Forest Development Authority (FDA) and Co-Chair of the JIC. “We are making up for momentum lost during the Ebola crisis. This would not have been possible without the strong support and commitment from the Government of Liberia and forest-sector stakeholders to the implementation of this agreement. Together we are working to create a system to ensure the legality of timber produced in Liberia. In doing so, we are setting an example for other sectors in the sustainable management of Liberia's natural resources.”

“The forestry sector is of enormous importance for Liberia,” said Tiina Intelmann, European Union Ambassador to Liberia. “Last year, the sector generated more than US\$8 million in tax revenue, and created legitimate jobs and economic opportunities. Good governance of the sector does not mean that forestry products are not extracted. It's about making sure that the extraction follows the laws of Liberia and that the benefits are shared with the population. The VPA is about the European Union and Liberia engaging on equal terms to promote mutual interests and transparency.”

The issues the JIC discussed included:

- Progress with the Liberian timber legality assurance system, notably with the establishment of the new Liberia Verification Department and software called LiberTrace, which will manage data used to track timber and verify its legality as it moves from forest to port/point of sale.
- Human resources for the legality assurance system and capacity building of the FDA, other government ministries and agencies, and non-governmental stakeholders
- Improvement of the regulatory framework
- Monitoring environmental, economic and social impacts of the VPA
- VPA implementation priorities for 2016

The JIC published the first joint annual report on the VPA, covering the period until the end of 2014. This report is available on the website of the FDA (<http://www.fda.gov.lr>).

The JIC also acknowledged the progress made in improving the transparency of the sector through the FDA website, radio programmes and other means.

“The forest sector is arguably the most open of all of Liberia's government ministries, agencies and commissions,” said Harrison Karnwea, Managing Director of FDA. “We have a multi-stakeholder body with representation from government, private sector, communities and NGOs that meets each month. Through their representatives on this committee, people in the interior who depend on forests can know what is happening in the sector. We also have a large amount of information available on the FDA website and would welcome suggestions from the public for ideas for additional information that it would be useful to include there.”

The Joint Implementation Committee stressed the importance of a well-trained, equipped and operational FDA to sustainably manage the forest resource in order to generate social benefits and much-needed revenue from timber and non-timber resources, as well as payments for ecosystem services.

Background Information

Liberia and the EU negotiated the VPA between 2009 and 2011. The EU ratified the VPA in 2012 and Liberia ratified it in 2013. They are now implementing the commitments they made in the agreement.

Under the VPA, Liberia commits to developing a timber legality assurance system so it can issue verified legal timber products with FLEGT licences. Once this system is operational, Liberia commits to export to the EU only FLEGT-licensed timber products. The EU commits to allow imports of FLEGT-licensed timber from Liberia to enter the EU market without due diligence checks.

Liberian representatives on this committee are drawn from Government institutions as well as from the private sector and civil society. The European Union is represented by the EU Delegation to Liberia and officials from the European Commission in Brussels.

More details of the JIC discussions can be found in the meeting's summary (aide-memoire), which will be published on the website of the FDA.

