

Procter & Gamble – Falling Short | Environment Maine



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Covering more than 1 billion acres in Canada alone, the boreal forest encircles the Earth with a seemingly endless expanse of coniferous trees. This great forest ecosystem provides critical habitat for species like the boreal caribou, lynx and marten as well as a nesting ground for billions of migratory birds. The region is filled with mossy peatlands and unbroken stretches of forest; its freshwater bodies provide drinking water for millions of people.

The vast boreal forest, however, is under threat from logging. But why are we cutting down this incredible ecosystem? One of the most ridiculous reasons is for making disposable single-use paper products for Procter & Gamble's Charmin', Puffs and Bounty brands.

We have been calling on Procter & Gamble to reduce their impact on the boreal forest, to stop using wood pulp from the intact, habitat-rich forests and to make use of other available fibers such as recycled paper, wheat straw and bamboo. Nevertheless, their most recent forestry policy — although it uses nice environmental-sounding words — does next to nothing to address the devastation their pulp suppliers are wreaking upon the boreal forest. Our colleagues at Natural Resources Defense Council break it down in this analysis:

Deflect, Distract, & Ignore: P&G's Greenwashing Continues

How P&G's latest announcement ignores investor concerns and furthers the myth of Canadian forestry's sustainability

This piece was originally posted on NRDC's website.

March 30, 2021 Shelley Vinyard

Procter & Gamble's (P&G's) shareholders made history last October. The world's largest asset managers, including BlackRock and State Street, voted overwhelmingly to urge P&G, one of the world's largest corporations, to eliminate deforestation and intact forest degradation from its supply chains, making it the first ever forest-related shareholder proposal to pass.

In their shareholder rebellion, investors gave a clear directive: P&G must figure out how to address risk created by significant impacts of its sourcing of pulp from Canada's boreal forest and palm oil from Southeast Asia, both of which are tied to human rights issues, deforestation, intact forest degradation, and threatened species loss.

But more than five months after that historic vote, P&G appears to be responding to its investors' urgent call with intransigence. The company's new "Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Platform" for investors indicates the company is choosing to ignore the impacts of its sourcing tissue pulp from intact forests in the climate-critical Canadian boreal and lag behind peers in action on palm oil. Instead of action, the company is doubling down on selling a myth of sustainability to consumers. In fact, though a recent Charmin ad touts the brand's commitment to "Protect, Grow, and Restore" forests, P&G's recent announcements and PR campaigns have more closely resembled a "Deflect, Distract, and Ignore" approach, once again choosing spin over meaningful action to protect climate-critical forests.

Deflecting responsibility for intact forest destruction

Perhaps the most notable absence from P&G's new platform is any plan for how the company will eliminate intact forest degradation from its supply chain. Half of the resolution shareholders supported in the fall was dedicated to calling on the company to increase its efforts to eliminate intact forest degradation, which is a major problem in Canada's boreal forest.

While P&G highlights its commitment to no deforestation in its new announcement, the company in effect ignores its Northern supply chains by failing to address intact forest degradation. Canada uses semantic nuance that exempts its industry's clearcut logging from standard definitions of "deforestation." Because the forest is replanted rather than converted to agricultural use or a built environment, Canada still classifies barren clearcut areas as forests—meaning there technically was no "deforestation." P&G pointedly highlights this definition of deforestation several times throughout its new website, effectively ignoring the very real, very harmful impacts the logging industry in Canada is having on Indigenous Peoples, climate and threatened species.

The reality is that, no matter whether the clearcut land still falls under industry's definition of a "forest," the value of intact, undisturbed forests for the climate and biodiversity is irreplaceable on any meaningful time frame, especially given the industry-oriented replanting methods. And even the subtle divide between Canada's practices and technical definitions of deforestation may, in fact, be illusory: recent research has shown that vast areas of the boreal that were logged decades ago remain barren to this day.

P&G seems all too happy to embrace Canada's claims of sustainable and responsible forestry in its new platform, despite scientific consensus around the reality of the industry's impacts. While P&G has known of the vast destruction caused by logging companies in the boreal for years, the company chooses again to provide cover to provincial governments that are rolling back environmental protections and an aggressively misleading industry instead of adopting more stringent sourcing policies that would lead to meaningful change from its suppliers. Through these failures, P&G is actively contributing to the loss of the world's largest remaining intact forest.

Distracting from inaction

P&G has taken little meaningful action since the investor rebellion. But just like any greenwashing attempt, the company's new announcement is filled with lofty language that distracts from its inaction.

Look no further than P&G's updated "Wood Pulp Sourcing Policy" to understand the implications of such a distraction. P&G's latest pulp policy announces the company's support for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), a vital process for upholding the rights of Indigenous and traditional communities. But it is still unclear whether P&G actually requires its suppliers to demonstrate their compliance with FPIC in Indigenous and traditional communities' lands—or whether it's empty rhetoric.

In fact, several of the largest logging companies in the boreal that supply pulp to P&G and other U.S. tissue manufacturers do not require FPIC in their operations, which underscores why a strong, unequivocal commitment from P&G is so vital.

This begs the question—what does P&G's support for FPIC actually mean in practice? Has P&G done anything to enforce this support for FPIC if the company knows its suppliers do not currently require it? Without transparency of process and timeline paired with clear expectations of consequences for violators in their supply chain, it's impossible to know the answers to these questions.

Much of the information on the investor platform, particularly in its section on pulp, fits this trend—long on words, light on concrete action.

Ignoring the forest for the trees

P&G has been criticized for its role in driving the "tree-to-toilet" pipeline for years, and little has changed in its latest announcement. Their stubborn adherence to the wasteful practice of making its toilet paper using trees from climate-critical forests indicates the tenuousness of their ambition around forest protection. Yet P&G seems unwilling to accept responsibility for ensuring that at least these trees are logged sustainably.

The company hypes its plans to accelerate its commitment to secure 75% of its pulp from Forest Stewardship Council-certified (FSC) sources. This is a positive step, but the problem with relying solely on FSC to ensure supply chain sustainability is that the system was never intended to be the only solution. FSC is designed to function in conjunction with individual corporate sourcing policies that reinforce the aspects of FSC that make it strong.

But P&G does not do that. Instead, the company equivocates between FSC and weaker certification systems; continues to fail to uphold the science underpinning important elements of FSC, like FSC Canada's caribou indicator; and continues to source from intact forests.

The bottom line from P&G's latest announcement is that investors must not be fooled. Despite understanding exactly what steps the company should take to adopt a sustainable, ethical approach, P&G has once again kicked the can down the road when it comes to making sure its forest sourcing is sustainable. But with a raging climate catastrophe and biodiversity crisis, there's not much road left before our planet and its inhabitants cannot recover.

P&G's announcement will test whether investors who are quickly coming to terms with their own culpability in the climate and biodiversity crises will side with science and decisive action or soft language and half measures that leave entire biomes at risk. Let's hope, for all of our sakes, they choose the former.

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