

To the Senate Committee on Community Affairs,

I am writing in support of the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009.

I support this Bill for the following reasons:

- **Consumer rights-** One of my basic rights as a human being is to be able to decide at my point of purchase whether I want to contribute to the loss of an ecosystem. Current labelling laws do not allow me to make this decision and I therefore believe that at present my government is letting me down.
- **Conservation of endangered species** – The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has identified palm oil as the major driver of deforestation in Borneo and Sumatra, and the biggest threat to the survival of the Orang-utan. They have called this situation a 'conservation emergency'.¹ I am not comfortable knowing that my country and my purchases at the supermarket are contributing to the loss of species such as the Orang-utan and Sumatran Tiger. I will feel even less comfortable about this in ten years time when these species, among others, are declared extinct in the wild – a prediction supported by many scientists and environmental organisations². As a Zoologist I know this is a possible reality, but one Australians can actively help to avoid if the Senate Committee of Community Affairs support this Bill.
- **Consumer driven market for sustainable palm oil** - Mandatory labelling will not only allow consumers to make informed decisions, but also help to educate the food industry. This education and the fear that consumers may decide against their products is very likely to help drive a market for certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO).
- **Social inequities** - Many people living and working within regions impacted by the unsustainable and unethical production of palm oil (the main type of palm oil making its way into our food) are suffering. Some indigenous communities are finding themselves selling their land for less than its value for short-term gains. They are then left with infertile, denuded land and a bleak future void of biodiversity and an ability to gain future income. Those that resist the temptation to sell their land can find themselves in conflict, being walked of their land or suffering threats that jeopardise their lives. I work with people that have heard and relayed these stories to me firsthand from regions such as Tangkahan, Sumatra. I don't like the fact that I know the name of a man that sold his land because he feared being shot in the head. I also don't like that I may have purchased food that contributed to his misfortune. This issue is real and it needs to be addressed urgently. The recent court ruling which awarded in favour of an Iban and Malay indigenous community against the Sarawak state government and an oil palm company that planned to establish an oil palm plantation on native lands is a great step forward in addressing social inequities caused by the palm oil industry³. However very few communities have the capacity to fight these battles within the framework of corrupt governments and legal systems based within developing nations. I hope that the Australian government and Australian legal system allows us to assist those in less fortunate nations through the provision of sustainable purchases.
- **Global Warming** - Often wet, swampy rainforests are drained to be cleared for palm oil plantations. As they dry, their peat filled soils release large amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas that has a global warming impact 23 times that of carbon dioxide. The clearing of virgin rainforest for oil palm plantations in regions such as Indonesia is known to be a major contributor to greenhouses gases and is therefore fueling global warming. The health of every human on planet earth is under threat due to the risks posed by global warming. CSPO certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable palm

¹ *Last Stand of the Oranutan*, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2007

² International Fund for Animal Welfare in Lean, 10 years left to live: Orang-utans face extinction in the wild. *Independent.co.uk*. 17 December 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/10-years-to-live-orangutan-faces-extinction-in-the-wild-428850.html>

³ To learn more about this court ruling go to http://news.mongabay.com/2010/0121-iban_sarawak.html

oil uses denuded land and has a set of key principles that allows me as a consumer to feel better about my purchase. This Bill requires CSPO to be clearly labeled.

- **Support future innovations** - Increasing market demand for CSPO will help strengthen the process of the production of the sustainable palm oil as it will generate further funds for research and increased production rates.
- **Health** - Palm oil is made up of over 50% saturated fat. The fact that it is not as bad for my health as oils with high levels of trans-fats does not comfort me. The heart foundation made a public statement reported in The Age newspaper on the 17th of April 2010 supporting the mandatory labeling of palm oil. Labeling would allow me to monitor my intake of this potentially harmful oil and reduce my risk of suffering from illnesses such as coronary heart disease later in life.
- **Fears of unprecedented rates of expansion** - Failure for nations such as our own to respond to this issue through the development of a consumer driven market for sustainable palm oil will greatly threaten the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the near future. Palm oil manufacturers have already begun to clear land in these regions and communities such as the Oro Province in PNG are already suffering from the loss of biodiversity within their homelands⁴.
- **Lead the way** - I want to feel proud that Australia is taking the lead on this issue. I want to live in a nation that inspires others to be great, not one that is willing to turn a blind eye to our role as global citizens and the value of informed consumerism.

I anticipate that the government will be able to find a list of reasons as to why they are unable or unwilling to pass this Bill. I ask that as a committee representing the Australian public, that you weigh up your list of reasons as to why you can't support this bill against the reasons listed above. Inconvenience and concerns about how much transparency our food labels should or shouldn't have (which should be determined by community expectations and not by food groups designed to make the lives of food manufacturers easy) shouldn't factor into decisions that threaten the loss of biodiversity. Nor should debates about whose responsibility this decision is. Somebody needs to take responsibility and I urge your committee to do so. I recognise that some food manufactures won't appreciate feeling pressured to purchase an oil that is higher in price, despite the fact that it is more sustainable. However people should not be in the business of making food if they can't do so ethically.

Biodiversity supports life. The success of this Bill will provide people like me with an opportunity to not only strengthen my influence as an informed consumer, but also determine the commitment that Australia's politicians have in serving the needs of the public, environment and our future.

I am more than willing to give evidence before a Senate Committee hearing in Canberra. I very much look forward to your committee responding to this Bill promptly and ethically.

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Lowry

⁴ To view a short video on the community response to palm oil development in the Pro province PNG got to <http://vimeo.com/5330739>