

## Why are countries failing on their promise to stop deforestation?

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By Adam Vaughan

Five years ago, countries and businesses committed to halving deforestation by 2020 and ending it entirely by 2030. The 2020 goal was a big, bold target – and one that has fallen flat on its face. Since 2014, the area of forest destroyed annually has got dramatically worse, increasing more than 40 per cent globally.

An area of 26 million hectares, roughly the size of the UK, was lost annually between 2014 and 2018, each year unlocking carbon emission equivalent to the EU's annual footprint, a report by an international group of research institutions and NGOs has found. The vast majority of the deforestation took place in the tropics.

The losses mean the 2020 target is now likely impossible to meet. "It's wake-up call. The situation now is more dire than five years ago," says Stephanie Roe of the University of Virginia, one of the report authors.

So why is the world failing to make good on its promises to stop deforestation? While the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests was endorsed by some big forest countries including Indonesia and a few Brazilian states,

along with the US and EU, it notably did not include Brazil.

The country has the biggest forests and still has the biggest absolute losses. While it made huge strides in cutting deforestation after the rampant clearances in the noughties, preliminary deforestation data and the fires in the Amazon this year suggest progress is now going into reverse. "There is a clear political agenda to prioritize agriculture and extractive industries and roll back environmental protections," says Constance McDermott at the University of Oxford.

While Latin America is still suffering the biggest absolute forest loss, Africa has seen the most significant change, with tree cover loss up 146 per cent in the past five years.

This is largely due to economic growth, particularly in the Congo basin. "There is pressure to allow expansion of palm oil, cocoa and other commercial land uses," says McDermott. The Democratic Republic of Congo continues to suffer from political instability, she says, which research has linked to forest cover.

### Global deforestation rates have increased in the past five years, despite a pledge to halve them by 2020

Gross tree cover loss, millions of hectares

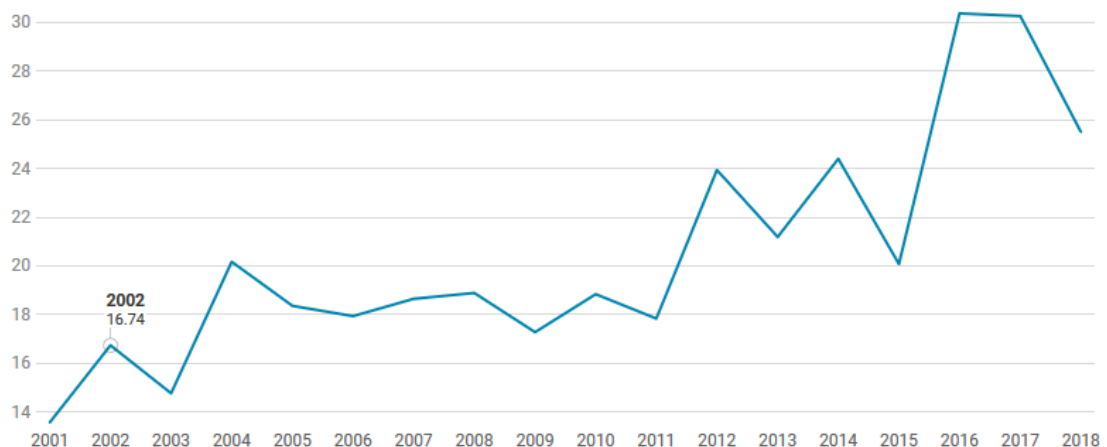


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Roe says governance in global deforestation hotspots is still not good enough. "There's been limited improvements in forest governance in these countries and in enforcing forest laws."

But the big reason deforestation is still rising is that it hasn't been addressed in a widespread, collective way. Some companies and countries have made ambitious pledges, but they are isolated. Only 8 per cent of the 350 most influential companies in forests globally have zero deforestation commitments across all their supply chains. "It's still more lucrative to clear forests than protect them," says Roe.

Simon Lewis of the University of Leeds agrees. "Well-designed interlocking policies can end deforestation. The piecemeal actions as we have seen so far will not." He also cites failure to curb demand in rich countries for products from deforested land, be it palm oil or beef.

There has been renewed awareness in the last two years about the role restoring forests will play in tackling climate change, due in part to the realisation restoration will be essential to hit countries' net zero carbon goals. However, Roe and colleagues found just 27 million hectares has been restored since 2000, less than a fifth of the target the New York Declaration set for 2020.

Roe thinks the 2030 target of ending deforestation could still be met. Further failure would be calamitous for hopes to rein in global warming, given the amount of carbon forests store. "This is not deforestation how we spoke about it in the 1990s and 2000s where it is a problem for those countries and biodiversity. This is a major global problem now," says Roe.

Source: <https://www.newscientist.com/>