

Commentary & Features

Timber logging malpractices in Ghana

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THE forests in Ghana can be classified into two categories, namely; the forest reserve and the forest outside the reserve, usually referred to as the off-reserve. Before 1985, the off-reserve forest was placed under the control of the Lands Commission which could not control illegal felling in these forests.

Specifically, illegal felling became so rampant that 20 per cent of the total timber harvested in 1994 was actually stolen from the off-reserve. Consequently, the off-reserve was removed from the control of the Lands Commission and placed under the jurisdiction of the Forestry Department (FD).

To curb illegal felling, the FD in collaboration with the government instituted a series of measures code-named "Interim Measures of 1995", which must be strictly adhered to before a tree can be legally logged in the off-reserve. The author and his student Evans Ansah, researched on the effectiveness of the Interim Measures of 1995 as regards timber industry productivity and conservation towards sustainable forest management in the Kumasi Metropolitan

Area.

A summary of the results indicated that the FD has been able to minimise illegal felling to a large extent through the implementation of the interim measures. The logging of under-sized trees have also been curtailed. It was noted that lumber recovery factor achieved in chain saw operations is intolerably low. Thus the

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ability to eliminate chain saw operators to some extent and send logs to the timber mills, contribute significantly to product recovery and resource conservation.

What is disheartening, however, is that all of the timber milling companies surveyed regard the interim measures of 1995 as a cumbersome bureaucracy mitigating against timely acquisition of logs from the off-reserve. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to bring together all implementing parties such as the FD, the farmer, community representatives and the concessioner or logger, to do pre- and post-felling inspections as stipulated by the

interim measures.

Due to this laxity, undersized logs are still being extracted and transported to the mills under the full cover of Forestry Department's Conveyance Certificates. Other complain of undue delays in obtaining conveyance certificates. The above difficulties are partly attributed to the low staff strength of the Forestry Department.

Another revelation is that some FD officials entrusted to check illegal felling do condone

night. Another 11 per cent of our respondents claim that top personnel of the Judicial Service collect huge bribes from tree looters sued at their courts, and thereafter, deliberately frustrate FD officials in prosecuting illegal loggers.

For example, it is believed that tree theft cases are woefully adjourned continuously

for the wood resource in the off-reserve, it was found out that the measures are not entirely protective. An important reason given for this is that our farming practices, mining operations as well as other excavating ventures are not properly monitored by government agencies. For example, environmental quality assessment reports from organisations such as mining companies are seldom submitted to the Forestry Department. Rather, it is believed that such companies endow frivolous gifts on personnel mandated to check their operations.

The general observation made from this study is that stakeholders who are not conscious of the future of the forest in Ghana believe that the interim measures have done more harm than good to industry. On the other hand, the Forestry Department, the Forest Products Inspection Bureau and the Ghana Timber Association hold the view that the interim measures of 1995 are very effective in controlling illegal logging towards sustainable forest management; and must therefore be reviewed and upgraded to form part of the National Forest Policy.

and connive with tree looters, thereby getting shares on stolen trees. It is also believed that some task force teams mandated to arrest illegal loggers, at times fell trees illegally and cunningly report to the FD in order to get 30 per cent share on the proceeds from the sale of the supposed interdicted logs.

In spite of the strict bureaucratic measures created by the interim measures, 11 per cent of our respondents complained that illegally felled logs are still being transported to various destinations due to the numerous routes constructed by the tree looters whose activities mostly take place at

and unnecessarily till such a time that the Forestry Department official representing the government on a case fails to appear before court; then judgement is passed in favour of the tree looters.

According to our respondents, this supposed calculated misgiving by some of the judicial gurus has seriously discouraged the Forestry Department from pursuing cases of illegal logging. It is also believed that fines imposed on tree looters by the courts are too meagre to serve as a deterrent measure in preventing illegal logging.

On the quest for full protective capability of the interim measures