

House Foreign Affairs Committee Testimony on the AMAZON21 Act

Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, May 12, 2022

“Thank you, Chairman Meeks and Ranking Member McCaul for holding this hearing and allowing me to speak on an issue that has been close to my heart for a very long time: protecting rainforests, and by extension, the health of our planet.

“Absorbing vast quantities of greenhouse gases, natural carbon sinks – such as rainforests, mangroves, peatlands, and wetlands – serve as the Earth’s lungs. Their well-being is inextricably linked to that of humanity. In recent decades, however, deforestation has destroyed swaths of these critical lands, worsening our climate crisis while simultaneously removing one of our greatest natural tools to address it. It is because of deforestation that Brazil and Indonesia are among the world’s top ten largest emitters. Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – the world’s leading climate scientific authority - has found that destruction of natural carbon sinks accounts for as much as a quarter of the world’s total greenhouse gas emissions.

“We need to take immediate and decisive action to protect these ecosystems. Our global effort to combat the climate crisis depends on it. The future of our planet depends on it. The survival and success of humanity depend on it.

“At the COP-26 conference in Glasgow last year, President Biden joined the leaders of 100 other nations in a historic pledge to end deforestation by the end of this decade. Now, that number is 141 nations that have made this promise. AMAZON21 would help fulfill America’s commitment to that global pledge by establishing a trust fund, which will enable the State Department to forge agreements with developing nations that will protect and restore their carbon sinks.

“In the past, the United States has been limited in its ability to enter into these bilateral agreements because of the short-term nature of funding through the annual appropriations process. Solving this long-standing issue, however, requires making long-lasting commitments. The trust fund created under my legislation would authorize the financing of conservation or restoration of nature-based climate projects abroad that protect carbon sinks far into the future. Similarly, AMAZON21 emphasizes transparency and a results-based funding model to ensure our partners make good on their promises to halt deforestation.

“Nations that enter into agreements with us through this legislation must agree to rigorous external monitoring, reporting, and verification of their progress. Improvements in satellite imagery capabilities have already made it impossible for partners to hide any violations. It’s simple: if countries don’t meet the terms of the agreement, they won’t receive funding.

“In a sense, Mr. Chairman, this is about paying producers for a resource from which we already benefit. That resource is the clean air we breathe. Far from being foreign aid, these payments would be an investment in the continued availability of clean air and a sustainable planet for us, for our children, and for generations of Americans to come.

“Moreover, the trust fund is designed to accept gifts from foundations, individuals, private companies, or other developed nations to help maximize the impact of America’s public investment. It is through these types of public-private partnerships that we can truly begin to tackle the deforestation crisis affecting our planet. AMAZON21 will also help developing nations participate in carbon markets, an important tool to leverage resources from the private sector to fund conservation work. It would also create a new technical assistance program at USAID to help them build their capacity to develop nature-based reforestation projects and scale them up.

“Mr. Chairman, helping these nations protect their rainforests serves our national security interest as well. These agreements would allow us to shore up our relationships with developing nations that may otherwise fall under the influence of authoritarian regimes seeking to exploit their resources instead of protect them. Members of this Committee know full well the long game that autocratic countries are playing in the developing world with initiatives like China’s ‘Belt and Road.’ We need to think creatively about how the United States can further our national security objectives while also tackling global challenges like deforestation in the process. With AMAZON21, America can firmly re-establish itself as the global leader when it comes to addressing the climate crisis.

“Mr. Chairman, each and every person has a stake in this legislation’s success. Whether you live in Bogota, Colombia, or Brandywine, Maryland – or even Austin, Texas – we all depend on the clean air that Earth’s rainforests and other carbon sinks provide. The climate crisis affects us all – and particularly the most vulnerable and those with the fewest resources, as the committee will hear shortly.

“Programs like AMAZON21 are the most impactful and cost-effective options available to us today to address climate change. This model has already been proven to work by nations like Norway, the United Kingdom, and others that have set up similar trust funds and authorities. For a sense of scale, if fully funded, these programs in my bill would eliminate as many as 180 million metric tons of carbon emissions each year – an amount equal to the total CO-2 produced by cars in the United States in two years. That’s why I was proud to introduce AMAZON21 in the House last November, and it’s why I’m glad to have this opportunity to speak about it with the Committee today.

“I want to thank Dr. M. Sanjayan of Conservation International for working closely with me on this bill over the past two years. I want to thank Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim for sharing her insights with the Committee today and the perspective of indigenous peoples and others most vulnerable to the climate crisis.

“I also want to thank Chairman Meeks again for holding today’s hearing and for cosponsoring this legislation, as well as Chairman Keating for shepherding AMAZON21 through the Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and Environment Subcommittee. I am also appreciative of Ranking Member McCaul’s continued interest in this issue as well as his input as we’ve moved forward.

“Nature has the power to heal our planet if we allow it to do so. I hope the Committee will endorse this historic commitment to protecting our planet’s carbon sinks and approve the AMAZON21 Act for consideration soon by the whole House. Thank you.”