

To Mark Jessel (Chief Systems Integrity Officer) and Kim Carstensen (CEO) at the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

For the further attention of: Members of the FSC Board and Assurance Services International (ASI- FSC's 100 per-cent owned subsidiary, responsible for overseeing FSC's activities)

As well as: Members and stakeholders of FSC.

Date: 22nd February 2024

Re: Demand for an independent inquiry into greenwashing by FSC in Belarus

We the undersigned [non-governmental organisations, investors, forest groups, individuals and Members of the European Parliament] are gravely concerned about the failure of the FSC to address issues first raised a year ago regarding its operations in Belarus.

For many years, FSC's seal was applied to wood products being produced by forced labour in penal colonies, including by political prisoners, as well as to forests controlled by a Belarusian official subject to EU sanctions for disappearing political opponents. FSC's seal was instrumental in giving an appearance of sustainability to timber products linked to these penal colonies and forests and served to open the door to trade with the EU. Although FSC [left Belarus in March 2022](#) for other reasons, it has failed to acknowledge or address its prior failures in the country and there is therefore nothing to prevent them being replicated elsewhere.

A [report](#) released by UK-based non-profit group Earthsight in November 2022 showed that for years Europe's largest furniture retail chains had been profiting from the torture of political prisoners in Belarus, while their purchases had also served to personally enrich the country's leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, at the expense of some of Europe's last pristine forests. It showed that a large share of this trade had been certified by the FSC up until its withdrawal announcement.

However, plentiful red flags about the state of governance in Belarus existed for years before this report was published. The repression in Belarus and its troubled relationship with the EU goes back a long way - the EU has imposed some form of sanctions on the country for [almost 20 years](#). Even after the [well-documented](#) brutal repression of public protests in the country in 2020 by the country's government, the Earthsight report exposed that FSC had allowed its label to be used by both forests controlled by the country's president Aleksandr Lukashenko personally and the prisons and timber mills involved in making furniture destined for international markets.

The report also revealed that forests under Presidential control were being managed by an individual named Viktor Sheiman, who had been subject to EU sanctions since 2004, after being named as [personally responsible](#) by the EU for the enforced 'disappearance' [and suspected

murder] of four of Belarus' opposition figures. A section of these forests received FSC-certification the year after Sheiman started managing them and other areas under his management continued to receive new certificates until January 2020.

The report showed that some of the prisons had even had their FSC certificates issued in late 2020, after the widespread imprisonment and torture of pro-democracy protestors in Belarus had made headlines worldwide. It showed that torture and maltreatment of two of Belarus's most prominent human rights activists and political dissidents at one prison had been well publicised before the prison nevertheless received an FSC certificate. One of these prisoners was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year.

In March 2022, FSC announced it was withdrawing from Belarus, a decision it said it had made based on an ASI review conducted [before](#) the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It [cited](#) concerns about the safety of its auditors and the disbanding of the sole remaining independent local environmental group as the reasons for its withdrawal. It did not indicate its auditing systems had picked up any violations and did not reference the links between Belarusian penal colonies and the timber trade to human rights abuses and other unacceptable activities.

EarthSight's report contained a demand for FSC to commission an independent investigation into how it came to allow this trade to receive certification, and to continue to remain certified in the first place. One year after the report's release, FSC has failed to initiate such an investigation. Nothing else it has said it is doing will prevent such a scandal from occurring again.

As it stands, for example, in following the language of the international ILO Convention, FSC's criteria continue to allow the certification of the products of forced prison labour. Were FSC not to have already withdrawn for other reasons, it is by no means clear whether the evidence in EarthSight's report would have provided sufficient grounds for termination of any certificates, let alone for the formal dissociation of any FSC members.

We are a group of concerned stakeholders with an interest in protecting the world's forests and human rights in Belarus. We also wish to ensure that consumers do not find themselves unknowingly buying products connected to human rights abuses and the suppression of dissent in Belarus. We find ourselves unable to force action through the FSC Policy of Association complaints mechanism, because of FSC's withdrawal from Belarus on other grounds.

- 1. Shocked by the organisation's failure to acknowledge, let alone address, this scandal, we are therefore writing to FSC as one voice to demand the commissioning of an urgent independent inquiry.**

Such an inquiry report must:

- Look into why FSC's systems allowed the certification of prisons connected to human rights abuses in Belarus, of forests (including protected forests) owned by Aleksandr Lukashenko and of timber firms buying wood products from these forests and prisons, despite plentiful evidence of wrongdoing existing in the public domain.
 - Consider both the direct and indirect causes of this epic failure, and both technical and systemic causes. It must consider, for example, technical issues such as the reliance on a definition of forced labour which exempts prison labour. It must also consider systemic challenges, most importantly, how allowing auditing firms to compete for business from those they are supposed to audit encourages a 'race to the bottom' and discourages common sense.
 - Include a range of stakeholders. Its results must also be made public. Where possible, the FSC Secretariat should act directly on its recommendations. Where relevant actions require a vote of members, it should put forward and support the necessary Motions.
 - Seek to recommend how FSC can change its systems to ensure similar scandals do not occur in future.
- 2. FSC must also consider whether some formal systems may be needed whereby countries need to meet some basic level of governance and political freedom before FSC certification can take place within them, and if they fall below that threshold FSC certification automatically ceases.**

Further resources:

<https://www.earthstight.org.uk/news/rubberstampingrepression>

<https://www.earthstight.org.uk/news/blog-open-letter-fsc-no-longer-fit-for-purpose-and-must-urgently-reform>

<https://fsc.org/en/fscs-position-on-russias-war-on-ukraine>

Signatories

Members of European Parliament

1. Anna Deparnay-Grunenberg, Greens/EFA, Germany
2. Benoit Biteau, Greens/EFA, France
3. Delara Burkhardt, S&D, Germany
4. Marie Toussaint, Greens/EFA, France
5. Martin Häusling, Greens/EFA, Germany
6. Michaela Šojdřová, EPP, Czech Republic
7. Michal Wiezik, Renew, Slovakia
8. Miriam Lexmann, EPP, Slovakia
9. Nicolae Ștefănuțaa, Greens/EFA, Romania
10. Pär Holmgren, Greens/EFA, Sweden

11. Rasa Juknevičienė, EPP, Lithuania
12. Thijs Reuten, S&D, The Netherlands
13. Thomas Waitz, Greens/EFA, Austria
14. Tineke Strik, Greens/EFA, The Netherlands

Civil society organisations

1. ACAT - Switzerland
2. Association of law enforcers of democratic Belarus - BELPOL - Belarus
3. Association Workshop for All Beings, Poland
4. Australian Forests and Climate Alliance, Australia
5. Biofuelwatch - UK and US
6. SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations), The Netherlands
7. Civil movement Legalize Belarus - Belarus
8. Earth Action, Inc.- US
9. Earth Thrive - UK
10. Environment East Gippland inc -Australia
11. Environmental Investigation Agency
12. Fern - Making the EU work for people and forests
13. Fundacja Lasy i Obywatele, Poland
14. Landelijk Netwerk Bossen- en Bomenbescherming - The Netherlands
15. Leefmilieu - The Netherlands
16. Libereco - Partnership for Human Rights - Germany
17. MARA: Belarussen in Nederland - The Netherlands
18. Progressive Shopper - United States
19. Pro REGENWALD -Germany
20. RAZAM.CH - Switzerland
21. Save Estonia's Forests - Estonia
22. Save Leitrim CLG - Ireland
23. SUPOLKA - Latvia
24. Teraz LASY! (Forests NOW! and forever) - Poland
25. Trend Asia - Indonesia
26. Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group - Ukraine
27. Water, Justice and Gender - The Netherlands
28. Wild Heritage - US
29. Zevin Asset Management - USA
30. ZMINA Human Rights Center - Ukraine

Individuals

31. David Young - UK
32. Mageswari Sangaralingam - Malaysia
33. Neil Foulkes - Ireland
34. Reiner Tegtmeyer - UK

35. Varpu Sairinen -Finland