

## Forests and Free Trade

Environmental groups are massing to battle a proposal to liberalize trade in forest products among Pacific Rim nations—which they claim will only speed the exploitation of East Asia's already fast-disappearing forests. They plan to press their argument at a 21 April public hearing scheduled in Washington, D.C., by the International Trade Commission. "This hearing is the only chance environmentalists will have to comment on this process," says Daniel Seligman of the Sierra Club in Washington, D.C.

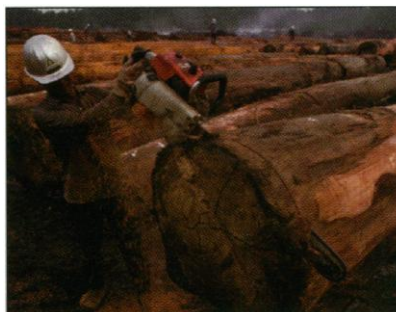
Last November the 22-nation Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) agreed to phase out wood trade barriers in Pacific Rim countries—which produce the bulk of the world's forest products—by 2004. Part of a global movement toward free trade, it would help boost sagging

Asian economies by making trade more efficient, they believe.

But environmentalists see this as an ominous trend. For example, elimination of "nontariff measures" such as bans on exporting raw logs raises the risks of introducing dangerous pests to the importing country, such as the Asian longhorn beetle now chewing its way through maple trees in New York, says Seligman. A group called the Global Forest Policy Project also claims that efforts to get timber products "certified" as coming from well-managed sources is regarded in some quarters as "impeding" trade.

Last month 115 environmental groups signed a letter urging the U.S. trade representative to push for an environmental impact statement on the proposal.

But that's unlikely. "We feel the preponderance of evidence" is that free trade will be more efficient and therefore less environmentally damaging, says a U.S.



**Fast track?** Hewing logs in Malaysia, a major Asian timber exporter.

DAVID MOORE/FPI

trade official. For example, she says, if China lowered its trade barriers it would be able to import wood products rather than rely on its own inefficient and highly polluting industry.

## Earth Satellite Launch Put on Hold

In a blow to earth scientists, NASA's ambitious plan to launch a series of large environment-monitoring spacecraft beginning in June has hit a major snag. Software for data gathering has significant performance problems and must be reworked, agency officials said last week. That means the Earth Observing System (EOS)—the centerpiece of NASA's "mission to Planet Earth"—will be delayed by at least 6 months.

EOS AM-1, the first of the series, is designed to examine clouds, aerosols, the planet's carbon cycle, and the "radiation budget"—the balance between energy coming in from the sun and that being reflected from Earth. Four launches of major spacecraft are slated through 2002, plus a host of smaller missions.

Outside advisory panels and congressional lawmakers have long warned that the EOS information system poses huge technical challenges, given the vast amount of data it must process. NASA officials are now weighing whether to fix the Raytheon-built software or junk it and start over. John Dalton, NASA's deputy chief for the data system, says the earliest likely launch date is mid-December.

## Sex and Science

Women need to break through the "Silicon Ceiling" as well as the "Glass Ceiling," according to Representative Connie Morella (R-MD). So she is pushing for a new study to assess the problems of women scientists and engineers in the workplace. The House Science Committee's technology subcommittee, which Morella heads, passed her measure (H.R. 3007) last month, and the full committee is expected to vote on it when Congress reconvenes next week.

A similar idea passed the House 5 years ago but failed to make it through the Senate. Now Morella is hoping the time is ripe to confront "the roadblocks for women in our rapidly evolving high-tech society." The proportion of women employed in computer science, for instance, has declined in recent years, former NSF Deputy Director Anne Petersen testified at a March hearing.

The bill passed by the subcommittee would establish a Commission on Women in Science, Engineering, and Technology Development, composed of 11 represen-

tatives of federal science-based agencies and congressional appointees. It would conduct a year-long study to focus on areas where women are underrepresented, such as engineering. The panel would try to figure out whether female scientists and technical workers are treated differently from their male counterparts, and issue recommendations for government,

university, and industry employers.

"I'd be surprised" if the commission came up with anything new, says Charlotte Kuh, director of the Office of Science and Engineering Personnel at the National Academy of Sciences. But "it would be a good idea to have a commission to remind us of what we know already and encourage us to act on it."

## Court Nixes NSF's Internet Funding Source

NGI stands for the Next Generation Internet, a federal program to upgrade the Net. But a district court has ruled that a congressional scheme for paying the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) share this year is also NGI—Not a Good Idea.

The Clinton Administration proposed the NGI in October 1996 as a five-agency, \$100-million-a-year effort to make the Internet faster and more secure, and to give it greater capacity. Last fall Congress decided that NSF's share, some \$23 million, was to be paid out of a special fund created by a portion of the registration fees charged certain Internet users. Those with domain names ending in .com, .net, or .org pay \$50 a year to the Virginia-based Network Solutions Inc., which manages the service for NSF.

The pot now contains an estimated \$50 million. But NSF may never get a penny. On 6 April, U.S. District Judge Timothy Hogan ruled that the set-aside (\$15 from each registration fee) is illegal because it's a tax.

And only Congress may tax.

The decision leaves NSF without NGI money this year to expand the number of universities connected to its faster vBNS network or to support research on continued improvements. "We've linked up 92 institutions, and we had hoped to get to 150 with NGI money," says NSF's Beth Gaston.

NSF says it's weighing whether to appeal Hogan's ruling, which notes that Congress could easily pass a law sanctioning the Internet tax and making it retroactive. In any event, other NGI agencies are pushing ahead: On Tuesday, Vice President Al Gore announced the latest round of NGI grants from the Pentagon, which this year received \$40 million of the \$62 million in NGI money appropriated through normal channels. He also joined telecommunications industry executives in unveiling a new, privately funded electronic highway, dubbed Abilene, that will connect to federal Internet efforts.