

**Amazon Watch · Earthjustice · Food First/Institute for Food and
Development Policy · Friends of the Earth · Greenpeace USA · Sierra
Club · Rainforest Action Network**

May 15, 2008

Re: Oppose the U.S. – Colombia Free Trade Agreement

Dear Member of Congress,

On behalf of our more than 3 million members and supporters, we urge you to oppose the Colombia-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which would lend credence to a system that routinely violates human rights and fails to adequately protect the environment.

Colombia is a country plagued by violence and conflict, where abuses of worker and human rights are committed routinely and all too often, with impunity. As stated by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on April 7th,

“An FTA is not a foreign-aid package. It is neither a favor for friendly governments, nor a substitute for sensible and sustained foreign-policy engagement in the hemisphere.... Many Democrats continue to have serious concerns about an agreement that creates the highest level of economic integration with a country where workers and their families are routinely murdered and subjected to violence and intimidation for seeking to exercise their most basic economic rights.”

Until Colombia can successfully enforce protections for its citizens, any agreement establishing further economic integration must be vigorously opposed.

Further, actions taken by the Colombian government since the FTA was negotiated violate both the letter and spirit of the obligations contained in the agreement. The environmental chapter specifically prohibits parties to the FTA from encouraging trade and investment through the weakening of domestic environmental regulations. Despite these obligations, a suite of legislative proposals in Colombia stand to systematically weaken environmental and natural resource protections to facilitate private investment.

In Colombia, poverty, inequality and violence are inextricably linked to the extraction and utilization of natural resources and many of the legal reforms are intended to facilitate the growing palm oil sector. Rapid expansion of Colombia's monoculture palm oil production, driven by surging demand for biodiesel, has already resulted in widespread violence, illegal land appropriation and large-scale deforestation. To date, the land area devoted to oil palm plantations has nearly doubled from 145,027 hectares in 1998 to 275,317 hectares in 2005, while the Colombian government has stated its intention to dramatically increase production to 6 million hectares by 2020.

Despite claims that palm oil production will decrease the propagation of illicit crops, narco-traffickers and paramilitaries routinely appropriate land for the establishment of palm plantations. The Colombian government has further implemented legal reforms to award territories illegally acquired by paramilitaries for palm oil production. Aid and environmental organizations in Colombia have documented forced and violent displacement of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations, as well as the murder of 113 local land owners at the hands of paramilitaries. In many cases, agribusiness willingly and knowingly supports such methods of land seizure. The Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (National Rural Development Institute, INCODER) confirmed in a March 2005 report that more than 93 per cent of the land that the companies planted with palm trees belonged to displaced Afro-Colombian communities. With the second largest population of displaced peoples outside of the Sudan, currently more than 3 million, Congress must oppose any trade agreement that leads to further displacement.

This FTA would also negatively impact Colombian agriculture, which accounts for 22% of employment, almost double the level of employment in Colombia's industrial sector. By agreeing to fully open its market to subsidized U.S. exports, small and medium scale farmers will be unable to compete. As experienced in Mexico, where more than 1.5 million farmers have been displaced since the implementation of NAFTA, Colombian rural communities will be vulnerable to unemployment and displacement. Given the clear link between rural poverty and increased conflict, passage of this agreement would not only decimate rural livelihoods but would also exacerbate existing conflict.

The undersigned organizations continue to support trade agreements that protect the environment and workers, and enhance public health while fostering strong democratic institutions and raising the standard of living worldwide. Despite the inclusion of some essential environmental and labor safeguards, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement none-the-less contains provisions that encourage the relocation of industry in pursuit of the least stringent environmental and social standards and continues to prioritize the rights of private corporations over the public good.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to oppose passage of the US – Colombia FTA.

Sincerely,

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