

✦ Conservationists urge govt to certify forest products

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MPIGI/MBENDE. Conservationists have asked government to prioritise certification to reduce the rampant illegal trade in forest products.

Dr Harrison O. Kojwang, the regional director for Forest Stewards Council (FSC) in Africa, said Uganda needs to increase certification of forest plantations from the estimated 40,000 hectares and promote practices such as bamboo, small scale forest plantations and influencing procurement policies to recognise and support certified products.

Dr Kojwang made the call while touring different forests in Mbende, Masaka and Mpiigi districts recently. "East Africa's priorities for 2019-2020 should focus on certifying government forests, engagement with large and small scale players in sustainable intensification in forest, local expertise with the FSC

system and promote responsible forest management thereby achieving economic, social and environmental benefits," he said.

Dr Kojwang was one of the speakers at the national dialogue for development of the roadmap for operationalisation of the Uganda National Forest Stewardship Standard (NFSS) at the weekend.

Dr Kojwang said NFSS provides a

FOREST CERTIFICATION

Forest certification is a mechanism for forest monitoring, tracing and labelling timber, wood, pulp products and non-timber forest products. The quality of management from environmental, social, and economic perspectives is judged against a series of agreed standards.

basis for a clear, stable and reasonable framework for responsible forest management.

Dr Joshua Zake, the executive director of Environmental Alert, a civil society organisation, said certification will provide better access to markets because certified timber products fetch in more value compared to non-certified products and have less impact on the environment.

Ms Annah Agasha, the FSC manager for East Africa, called for concerted efforts to motivate communities to use the standards for good forestry practices since they are the biggest suppliers of wood products.

Mr Bob Kazungu, the officer-in-charge of monitoring and inspection of the forestry sector, said although forest certification is a voluntary process, it has been derailed by weak local government extension services and lack of awareness from the business community and consumers.

"Government institutions are consuming about 20 per cent of the wood that is on the market and yet 80 per cent of the wood on the market is illegally transacted. We are planning to interest our minister and government ministries through Cabinet so that they can only buy legally secured wood," he said.

Mr Kazungu said government is in the process of reviewing the 2001 Uganda forest policy to take stock of the elements that need to change to enhance forest protection.

"If we do this revision and the population is sensitised, we will be able to get policies such as certification, community forest management and collaborative forest management to curb forest cover extinction," he said.

Mr Kazungu said the reviewed policy will help restore forest cover countrywide, which is currently being lost at 122,000 hectares annually.