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## EU deforestation law overlooks emerging crops

The new European Union (EU) deforestation law, for which a provisional political agreement has been reached (1), aims to limit imported commodities identified as the main drivers of deforestation, such as cocoa, coffee, oil palm, and soya (2). According to the current proposal, none of these products “would be allowed to enter or exit the EU market if they were produced on land subject to deforestation or forest degradation” after 31 December 2020 (3). Because production and consumption patterns can shift rapidly as global markets fluctuate, legislation should also allow for limits on emerging commodities that degrade forests; cashew-driven deforestation in the Afrotropics is a poignant example.

Cultivation of cashew (*Anacardium occidentale* L.) has grown seven-fold in recent decades, from 1.1 million ha in 1988 to 7.1 million ha in 2020, and demand continues to rise (4). As of 2020, the total area covered by cashew was still much lower than oil palm (29 million ha) and soybeans (127 million ha), but it has quickly reached the scale of coffee (11 million ha) and cocoa (12 million ha) (5). Furthermore, compared with cashew, coffee and cocoa are increasing at a much slower rate; since 1988, coffee has seen little change, and cocoa has doubled (5). Cashew, like other crops that have devastated tropical forests worldwide (2), is grown in full sun monocultures at vast scales. Although cashew research remains scant, there is mounting evidence that plantations offer little habitat for native species and encroach upon biodiverse forests inhabited by African forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), and other endangered species (6–10). The new deforestation law is an important step to prevent the EU-driven loss of forest, carbon stocks, and biodiversity, particularly in megadiverse tropical regions (11). However, to meet these goals, the list of commodities regulated by the EU law needs to build in the option to add emerging crops with high deforestation potential. Without that flexibility, crops such as cashew will remain unregulated as they increasingly drive forest destruction across the tropics.

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PHOTO: DE ROUVROY/NITIDAE, 2021

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