Food firms blamed for Indonesian forest damage

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THE world's largest food manufacturers are increasing greenhouse gas emissions by driving the destruction of Indonesia's rainforests to make way for palm oil plantations.

A Greenpeace report released yesterday describes as "climate vandals" such firms as Nestle, Kraft, Procter & Gamble and Unilever for their part in clearing tropical forests to produce cheap vegetable oil.

"Tropical deforestation accounts for about a fifth of all global emissions," the report says. "Indonesia now has the fastest deforestation rate of any major forested country."

Indonesia's greenhouse emissions from deforestation alone account for 4 per cent of the world's annual total, with the country now the third-largest greenhouse gas emitter.

"This investigation shows that a handful of international corporations are ultimately responsible for the slashing and burning of Indonesia's peatland forests for food, fuel and laundry detergent," said Emmy Hafild, executive director of Greenpeace South-East Asia.

"Some of the best known brands in the world are literally cooking the climate," she said.

Increasing demand for palm oil from Indonesia for food and biofuels is driving the logging and burning of forests that capture carbon dioxide, and the draining and burning of peatlands for plantations leads to huge releases

of the gas.

Although the use of palm oil as a biofuel instead of conventional oil has been promoted as environmentally friendly, the expanding industry is becoming a major contributor to global warming, the report says.

Tropical rainforests store much more carbon in microbes in the soil than in the leaves and branches of trees. In metres-deep peat wetlands that is magnified. Every year 1.8 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide are released by the destruction of Indonesia's peatlands.

"Unless efforts are made to halt forest and peatland destruction, emissions from these peatlands may trigger a 'climate bomb'," the report warns.

Multinational food companies use nearly half the world's production of palm oil. They deny direct involvement in palm plantations, but accept that there is a problem sourcing sustainable oil. In a letter to Greenpeace, Nestle, which uses 170,000 tonnes of palm oil from Malaysia and Indonesia, said it sourced its supplies from "responsible" suppliers. Unilever, which uses 1.2 million tonnes of palm oil a year, said it attempted to ensure oil supplies were grown in an environmentally responsible way, but those efforts had "been made harder by the rush into biofuels".

http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/food-firms-blamed-for-indonesian-forest-damage/2007/11/08/1194329410360.html