



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

**FOOD STANDARDS AMENDMENT (TRUTH
IN LABELLING—PALM OIL) BILL 2009**

Second Reading

SPEECH

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Speaker Brown, Sen Bob

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Senator BOB BROWN (Tasmania—Leader of the Australian Greens) (3.48 pm)—*The incorporated speech read as follows—*

This Bill provides for a clear and accurate system of food labelling, specifically information on the use of palm oil as an ingredient. The use of palm oil as a food ingredient and as a biofuel is having a devastating impact on tropical forests, creating widespread deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia, destroying the food crops and the way of life of the indigenous people and importantly causing the destruction of the habitat of the orangutan in those countries.

A system of clear and accurate labelling on food products containing palm oil will enable Australian consumers to make informed choices about the products they purchase.

There is a large and growing international campaign against the use of palm oil and the practice of food crops being displaced by fuel crops and the ongoing deforestation of tropical regions for palm oil. The Australian Greens are among many organisations, including Zoos Victoria, the Rainforest Action Network and Friends of the Earth International, which support calls for an immediate moratorium on forest and peat land conversion to oil palm plantations.

Palm oil is an edible vegetable oil obtained from the fruit of the African oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*). African Oil palms originated in West Africa, but flourish wherever heat and rainfall are abundant. For that reason palm oil has been introduced as an agricultural crop in a range of countries. However, it is estimated that over 85% of the world's palm oil comes from Malaysia and Indonesia. Oil palm is the world's most productive oil seed.

Palm oil is used as an alternative for partially hydrogenated oil and is found in many everyday products including biscuits, crackers, batters, chips, shampoo, skin care and beauty products. An estimated 40% of our food contains palm oil. It is also used as a biofuel and it is this usage that is markedly increasing the global demand for this product.

The increased demand for palm oil is fuelling destruction of the rainforest habitat of orangutans. In South East Asia the equivalent of 300 football fields are deforested every hour for palm oil production. The combined effect of logging and oil palm expansion resulted in Indonesia having the world's highest deforestation rate in 2006 according to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report from 2007. It concluded that up to 98% of the orangutan habitat in Borneo and Sumatra may be destroyed by 2022 without urgent action.

While there are millions of hectares of already degraded land that could be used for plantations, many oil palm companies choose instead to increase their profits by logging the rainforest before planting oil palms. Palm oil companies also frequently use uncontrolled burning to clear the land, resulting in thousands of orangutans being burned to death. Those that survive have nowhere to live and nothing left to eat.

Orangutans are the species most at risk by the widespread deforestation of tropical rainforests for palm oil plantations. They are found on two islands, Borneo and Sumatra and live in lowland and hilly tropical rainforests. The World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Animals lists the Sumatran species of the orangutan as critically endangered and the Bornean species is listed as endangered.

Indigenous peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia call this ape "Orang Hutan" literally translating into English as "People of the Forest". These long-haired, orangish primates are highly intelligent and are close relatives of humans, sharing 97% of our DNA.

The orangutan is regarded as an "umbrella" species. Its arboreal tree-swinging journeys help to spread tree seeds - in fact some trees can only germinate when they have passed through its gut. The orangutan plays a pivotal role in creating the necessary environment for the thousands of fauna and flora species which make up the biodiversity of the South East Asian rain forest.

According to National Geographic, because orangutans live in only a few places, and because they are so dependent upon trees, they are particularly susceptible to logging in these areas. Unfortunately, deforestation and other human activities, such as hunting, have placed the orangutan in danger of extinction.

For all these reasons this Bill, the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009 is important, timely and necessary legislation. Through our everyday shopping habits Australians are unwittingly complicit in this destruction of habitat and the threat to the survival of a unique species.

It is currently difficult to know whether a product contains palm oil, as there are no requirements to label palm oil as a specific ingredient. Palm oil is usually simply labelled "vegetable oil" causing Australians to unknowingly consume on average 10 kilograms of palm oil each year.

Once palm oil is labelled, consumers will be able to drive a market for properly certified sustainable palm oil. This Bill encourages the use of certified sustainable palm oil. Sustainable palm oil uses land which has already been cleared, preventing further destruction of orang-utan habitat.

A similar phenomenon has been witnessed with labelling schemes such as Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance and Marine Stewardship Council.

Consumers deserve to know whether the products they purchase contain palm oil.

This bill enables consumers to make the active choice of protecting orangutans and their habitat.

I am pleased to be co-sponsoring this Bill with Senators Xenophon and Joyce and I commend it to the Senate.

Senator XENOPHON—I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

Debate (on motion by **Senator Xenophon**) adjourned.