

# *Panama requests help to stop destruction of forests*

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Panama City, September 24 (RHC)-- Panamanian Environment Minister Milciades Concepcion warned that just three of his country's 10 provinces have good forest coverage after decades of deforestation that has destroyed at least 50 of the woodlands and jungle.

According to the official estimate, 50 percent of Panama's forests have been lost, as well as the biodiversity they harbored. About 30 percent of the lands that have been deforested are sterile, requiring action to regenerate and recover the soil.

Deforestation started to increase since the 1950s, degrading about 10 percent of the total forest coverage, according to Concepcion. "Then, we had almost 90 percent forest coverage, and it was degraded so much that by 2012, which is the latest report we have, we had practically 50 percent less."

The areas where forest coverage is still high is in Darien, Colon and Bocas del Toro. In Darien, 20 percent of Darien province has been deforested in the last seven years - about 8.2 hectares each day, more than 3,000 hectares each year. "All the studies tell us that 90 percent of the lumbering in the Darien forests is from clearcutting, that is, as a result of cattle-raising and agriculture," Concepcion said in an interview with EFE.

The 80 percent of the forest coverage left in Darien, is above all located in indigenous areas and in the forest preserve, in the protected areas. In the areas where there are no indigenous peoples and in the non-protected areas is where basically the 20 percent has been destroyed.

In this province, authorities have established a resolution for a one-year moratorium, prohibiting new (lumbering) permits and controlling the permits authorized during past administrations, so that the rules of sustainable extraction are complied with.

He asked for everyone's help in implementing plans to recover and monitor the forests, including the one-year moratorium at the national level on lumbering and the suspension on issuing lumbering permits.

In Darien and in Bocas del Toro, he said that many people have already been nabbed "in the act" with chainsaws cutting down trees and all that equipment has been confiscated from them and they've been put at the disposal of the environmental prosecutors.

"We need to organize society so that we're all defending our natural resources. We at the Environment Ministry alone, with our 1,700 personnel, cannot do it. We're leading the environmental effort... We want to work as a team because all of us have to save the country environmentally."

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