

Solving the problems caused by unsustainable palm oil cultivation, including loss of tropical forests, GHG emissions and land conflicts, is the goal of many food and non-food companies.

However, ending deforestation while delivering the world's most widely-used vegetable fat, is a complex issue. And while the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was created to address this issue through the creation of the RSPO standard, no single organisation can tackle it alone. It is a journey of continuous improvement involving the collaboration of many actors across the palm oil supply chain: growers, processors and traders, manufacturers, retailers, investors, environmental NGOs and social NGOs.

Much has been achieved over the last decade. Yet deforestation and social conflicts provoked by palm oil cultivation remain a reality in some regions. We need to convert more growers to our sustainability agenda. RSPO is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and robust standard today. But there is room for innovation within the RSPO and ensure a more stringent implementation of its criteria.

Collaboration within RSPO members and externally with like-minded organisations is essential to delivering on our mission. The greater the number of engaged actors, the better our chance to transform the market to make certified sustainable palm oil the norm, and not a niche.

One such organisation is The Forest Trust (TFT). As a key player in the struggle against deforestation, they have an important voice in the palm oil dialogue. The potential synergies between the RSPO and TFT are strong. We share similar intents. Consumers are relying on both of us to do the right thing. Which is why I am writing today to invite TFT to collaborate with the RSPO.

Palm oil is a commodity with little regard given to who produces it and to where it is produced. To transform this market, industries need a standard, specifically a set of common principles to define sustainable palm oil in a uniform way across the globe, so that it is the same, no matter where it is produced.

Some end users, however, aspire to achieve a higher level of sustainability assurance by tracing their palm oil to a specific plantation. This is information that could be delivered today only by a few players, due to their favourable economic or geographical circumstances. To do so, someone outside the market needs to map the supply chain – provided it does not change over time – and identify the sources. Once the sources have been found, manufacturers and growers can work together to improve the requirements of the product. This is the role of organisations, such as TFT, who focus on these aspects. They allow individual companies and growers to work together, trace palm oil and implement specific sustainability requirements, which can build on the RSPO platform.

This model, as proposed for example by TFT, has three main challenges. Firstly, growers have multiple customers and want to maintain access to a global commodity market. To preserve this flexibility they'll continue to need a standard.

Secondly, if everyone relies on completely different criteria, achieving scale and maintaining flexibility will be difficult. To maximise acceptance of these criteria, a broad spectrum of interests must agree on what the criteria should include. RSPO has done so by involving seven different stakeholder groups in the definition of its own standard.

Thirdly, in this model, once palm oil has been produced sustainably, the next step is ensuring the product is not mixed with non-sustainable palm oil during its journey from plantation to factory. Traders and refiners must be able to guarantee that mixing has not happened. To a certain level, this can be done today. Palm oil in products can be sourced and traced back to a single oil mill and its set of certified plantations, through the RSPO Identity Preserved Supply Chain Model. This said, not all players can achieve this in the short run. Once again, industry needs a standard aimed at scale and flexibility. To this end, RSPO has created and is open to improve its specific certification system for the supply chain.

These challenges reinforce the importance of collaboration between RSPO and TFT.

Today, RSPO and its members can count on 55 certified growers companies, 248 certified palm oil mills and thousands of smallholders worldwide. This certified palm oil reaches its final destination via a supply chain including 693 certified supply chain members and 1388 certified facilities, in which it is stocked, refined, processed and marketed. Certainly, anyone wanting to source sustainable palm oil and become a sustainability leader can rely on this critical mass, and build on it to go even further. RSPO is a standard. Many brand products rely on standards for some of their components, and yet they achieve significant brand differentiation.

RSPO welcomes the role of market leaders who use its standard as the building block of a more ambitious project. TFT has been particularly effective in helping many European companies to deliver on their sustainability commitments. Our role, however, considers the broader market rather than individual companies. Working together with TFT and its partners, we can ensure our house will be bigger, and more RSPO certified palm oil will be sold. These companies are a great asset to increasing demand for certified sustainable palm oil and converting more growers to a sustainable palm oil agenda. I look forward to discussing with TFT ways to make this a reality.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Darrel Webber".

Darrel Webber,

RSPO Secretary General