What were the reasons to establish the China Responsible Forest Products Trade and Investment Alliance (China RFA)?

Bin: "Today we are facing a number of global environmental challenges, including climate change, which has been intensified by globalization of the economy. In order to address these challenges, we should strive for sustainable economic development in harmony with nature. Forests are important for the health of the planet. They play an important role in mitigating climate change by storing greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. That is why there is an international consensus about the need to retain forests and establish conditions for responsible forest management and responsible utilization of forest resources.

China, as a responsible country, has a role to play in combatting illegal logging and associated trade overseas, and in incentivizing the timber industry to engage in investment, production and trade of green forest products only."

Bin continues: "In order to push, motivate and support Chinese timber companies to undertake trade of legal and sustainable forest products, a number of organizations initiated the China Responsible Forest Product Trade and Investment Alliance (China RFA) in 2014. It emanated from the China-UK Collaboration on International Forest Investment & Trade (InFIT). In 2019 China RFA was approved as the brand of the National Forestry and Grassland Innovation Alliance by the National Forestry and Grassland Administration (NFGA) of the national government of China."

The China Responsible Forest Products Trade and Investment Alliance (China RFA) supports Chinese timber companies in sustainable forest management in the Congo Basin and in building a sustainable supply chain of responsibly sourced forest products. Professor Xu Bin¹, Secretary-General of China RFA tells how this is done.

¹ Professor Xu Bin (1974) is director of the Sustainable Forestry Research Division at the Research Institute of Forestry Policy and Information, Chinese Academy of Forestry.
Forest concession in Gabon.

What are the goals of China RFA?
Bin: ‘With the core concept of “Open Collaboration, Collaborative Innovation, Co-construction and Sharing, and Green Development”, China RFA uses its resources and services to:
• Jointly build a technological innovation system and an integrated platform of governments, the industry, universities and research organizations to serve the needs of timber enterprises;
• Promote innovation in theories, standards, models, technologies, policies, and mechanisms of forest products trade and investment; and
• Build sustainable supply chains of forest products, so as to promote the responsible forest products trade and investment in China.’

What is your definition of the term “responsible”? Bin: “Responsible” is a broad concept. Generally, it means one should comply with all local laws and regulations. Regarding production and trade of forest products, “responsible” means that the wood is sourced in a legal or sustainable way.

Why is it in the interest of Chinese timber companies and Chinese timber traders acting in the Congo Basin, to engage in ecologically and socially responsible forest management?
Bin: ‘The Congo Basin has the second largest tropical rainforest in the world. The sustainable management and utilization of forest resources in the Congo Basin is related to global biodiversity and ecological security. China is the largest importer of wood from the Congo Basin. Chinese timber companies and Chinese timber traders acting in the Congo Basin must take responsibility for forest resource protection and sustainable development in order to keep their number one position in the global forest products trade.’ Bin explains: ‘Firstly, Chinese companies should carry out sustainable harvesting and utilization of forest resources. They should ensure the legality and traceability of forest products by taking measures such as forest certification and legality verification in order to maintain the company’s positive reputation. Secondly, companies need to focus on local public welfare undertakings, maintain good community relations and drive local economic development to create a good external environment for enterprise development. In recent years China’s foreign investment has been growing rapidly, especially in Africa. Operations and investments that conform to the principles of sustainable development are in the long-term interests of enterprises and are the basic requirements for the long-term prosperity of China-Africa relations.’

China RFA wants to support Chinese timber importers to ensure that their supply chains exclude illegal timber and that they are able to meet the demands of their customers. What does the support of the China RFA consist of?
Bin: ‘Our key activities and services for China RFA members and other companies are:
• Extend the information center for China Responsible Forest Product Trade and deliver market and policy information for responsibly sourced timber through our website, the We Chat public platform and a newsletter;
• Develop the code of conduct for China RFA members and engage all members to exercise due diligence on wood legality and responsible trade practices;
• Develop technical guidelines and tools/templates for a China Wood Legality Due Diligence System and an on-line risk assessment platform to help companies quickly and efficiently carry out due diligence on the legality of timber sources;
• Offer training and technical support regarding forest trade policy and markets, timber legality and forest certification to improve awareness and capacity in responsible forest product trade;
• Set up a company/product database for China Responsible Forest Product Trade and Investment, and provide the promotion and market linkage service for China RFA members;
• Facilitate the discussion and development of standards and policies relevant to responsible forest trade.’

What type of demands by buyers of Chinese timber end products do you perceive in 2020 and 2021 in markets in Europe, in the USA, in Asia and in China’s domestic market?
Bin: ‘The European market mainly requires that companies meet timber legality requirements of the EU Timber Regulation, requiring that companies conduct due diligence, forest certification, etc. The U.S. market requires that companies take measures to meet the requirements of the Lacey Act, including tracing the source of timber products, and on the other hand pays more attention to environmental protection requirements such as the release of volatile organic compounds (VOC) of products like furniture and flooring. Some Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea and Indonesia have also put forward regulations on the due diligence system of wood legality, but most countries in Asia do not have such requirements at the moment.’ (September 2020, when this interview had taken place, ed.)
Bin: ‘In China, the Forest Laws and the Implementation Regulation of Forest Laws also require that forest companies ensure the legal source of wood materials, but it mainly focuses on the domestic wood, and the requirements for the imported wood are under discussion. In addition, products in China’s domestic market need to comply with relevant domestic quality and environmental protection standards. As the public awareness of green and environmental protection becomes popular, wood products with a high environmental protection standard are more welcome in the market.’

As the public awareness of green and environmental protection becomes popular, wood products with a high environmental protection standard are more welcome in the market.
In timber trade between Africa and China both sides play a role in making sure that traded timber is sourced in a responsible way. How can the government of China contribute to this? And how can African governments contribute to this, in your view? Are there other stakeholders who can contribute to this? Please explain.

Bin: ‘The Chinese government should strengthen the cooperation with African countries on forest governance and responsible forest product trade using mechanisms such as the China-Africa Cooperation Forum. It should promote international negotiations and the development of an international agreement regarding responsible forest product trade and wood legality. Within China, the Chinese government should strengthen education, training and guidance on sustainable forest resource management and utilization for Chinese companies investing in African countries.’

African governments should continuously strengthen forest laws development, enforcement and forest governance to ensure the legal supply of wood and wood products to the market.

He continues: ‘African governments should continuously strengthen forest laws development, enforcement and forest governance to ensure the legal supply of wood and wood products to the market and also create a good investment environment for Chinese companies investing in African countries.’

The Chinese government should promote international negotiations and the development of an international agreement regarding responsible forest product trade and wood legality.

In September 2020 China RFA has 90+ registered members and a database of 9000+ Chinese companies which produce responsible forestry products. China RFA is run by a council of representatives of 26 member organizations.

Source: www.chinarfa.cn

China Responsible Forest Product Trade and Investment Alliance (China RFA) was founded in 2014 by the Center for International Forest Products Trade of the State Forestry Administration of the national government of China (now the National Forest and Grassland Administration – NFGA), in partnership with national and international environmental civil society organizations, research institutes, financial organizations, timber industry associations, well-known enterprises in the timber industry and other organizations. The Secretariat is the executing agency of the alliance. It is located in the Research Institute of Forestry Policy and Information of the Chinese Academy of Forestry (RIPPI, CAF).

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Source: www.chinarfa.cn

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