



Uganda Sugar cane plan threatens forest

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Forest at risk in Uganda

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As Uganda grapples with a shortage of sugar that has caused prices to more than double in a year, President Yoweri Museveni has resurrected his plan to convert a quarter of a major natural forest into a sugarcane plantation.

Underlying Museveni's plan is an obvious conflict of economic and environmental imperatives. Environmental authorities say that Uganda, with the world's third-fastest growing population, loses 2% of its forest cover annually; 10% from protected areas like Mabira, due to logging and human settlement. The National Forestry Authority (NFA) highlights warnings by some experts that, at the current rate, the country could have no forests by 2050.

Museveni last week told local leaders that the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL) would be given about 7,100 hectares of the 30,000-hectare Mabira forest to expand its cane plantations. The move, which has been condemned by conservation groups and the political opposition, is not new. In 2007, three people died during demonstrations against Museveni's plans.

At the time, the government said SCOUL would double annual sugar production to 100,000 tonnes, create 3,500 jobs and pay an extra \$4m in taxes. The director and other officials of the NFA resigned in protest and the government appeared to back down.

Museveni has shown it was a retreat, not a surrender. The government needs parliamentary approval to change the forest's protected status, but Museveni's party has a clear majority in the house. His logic appears to be that Uganda should not have to import sugar while forest land lies idle.

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