



Escalating Illegal Activities in the Columbia River Forest Reserve

Ya'axché Conservation Trust (Ya'axché) works at the intersection of terrestrial protected areas management, biodiversity monitoring and research, and sustainable livelihood development within the Maya Golden Landscape in Toledo, Belize. Since 2008, Ya'axché has been the co-manager of the Bladen Nature Reserve and has supported surveillance patrols in the Columbia River Forest Reserve alongside key governmental and non-governmental partners. The Columbia River Forest Reserve, part of the Maya Mountains Massif, safeguards unique biodiversity including Critically Endangered species, provides vital ecosystem services and directly supports twelve indigenous Maya communities.

On August 20th, 2025, Ya'axché's enforcement and compliance rangers participated in a 10-day enforcement operation led by the Belize Defense Force with the aim of gathering information on illegal activities occurring in the Bladen Nature Reserve, Columbia River Forest Reserve and surrounding areas along the Belize/Guatemala border and the Adjacency Zone. The patrol findings document extensive illegal activities occurring in the Columbia River Forest Reserve, dominated by what appears to be organized commercial operations for the harvesting of mahogany, rosewood, nargusta, sapodilla, yemery and other timber species. The patrol team encountered a road constructed inside Belize, measuring about 30 feet wide and extending approximately 6 kilometers into the Columbia River Forest Reserve. The road included five wooden bridges, built to facilitate the crossing of vehicles and heavy machinery into Belize and back into Guatemala. This illegal timber extraction operation is in proximity to the Machaquilha Conservation Post, which is 1.4 kilometers from the Belize/Guatemala border. Evidence suggests there has been rapid expansion of these illegal operations, as previously reported by Greater Belize Media on March 21, 2024, in the segment titled *"Guatemalan Road Developments Inside Belize"*.

Additionally, the patrol team documented over 100 acres of agricultural clearances used for cattle ranching, production of beans, corn, and cardamom among other crops. Remote sensing data indicates approximately 450 acres of Belizean territory have been cleared for illegal agriculture in the general area of the documented activity. During the 2024 fire season, large areas within the Columbia River Forest Reserve were burned and are now being used to expand the agriculture frontier further into Belize. These illegal activities threaten Belize's natural resources, cause significant environmental degradation, and pose a serious national security concern requiring urgent intervention from the Government of Belize and relevant authorities. While commendable

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 15, 2025

Punta Gorda

Toledo, Belize



efforts have been made to secure the forests of the Chiquibul National Park and the Bladen Nature Reserve, it is now evident that illegal incursions have shifted southward into the Columbia River Forest Reserve which currently lacks year-round security presence.

The management plan for the reserve (2011-2015), which is long expired, recommended the installation of additional conservation posts for increased enforcement presence, community-driven management of the reserve, community sustainable natural resource use via concession, adoption of agroforestry practices, reforestation efforts, among other management actions. These recommendations remain relevant today to ensure preservation of biodiversity, watershed functionality, and viability of ecosystems. The continued destruction of this key biodiversity area demands a swift and accountable response from the highest levels of Government. Without any intervention we can expect continued degradation of our resources and the further erosion of our territorial integrity.

Ya'axché remains steadfast in its commitment to protecting Belize's natural heritage for the benefit of all Belizeans. We urge the Government of Belize and security forces to address the matter with urgency to halt the unregulated, illegal pillaging of our natural resources and the breach of our territorial sovereignty. We call upon and urge the people of Belize to stay informed and demand accountability and protection of our national assets.

END.