

Fake Documents

How to spot them and what to do about them



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Introduction: Five tips for spotting and dealing with fake timber legality documents

This article provides some hints and tips for how to spot fake or forged documents. We've written it because the EU Timber Regulation requires companies to come up with a due diligence system to minimise the risk that they're selling illegal timber. Such due diligence systems invariably rely, in part, on collecting documents to provide evidence of legality – harvest permits, land tenure certificates, forest management plans, phytosanitary certificates, VAT invoices... The list goes on.

But are the documents your suppliers are sending to you genuine? We have worked with a number of companies to help them create and implement timber legality due diligence systems and we've come across quite a few suspicious documents.



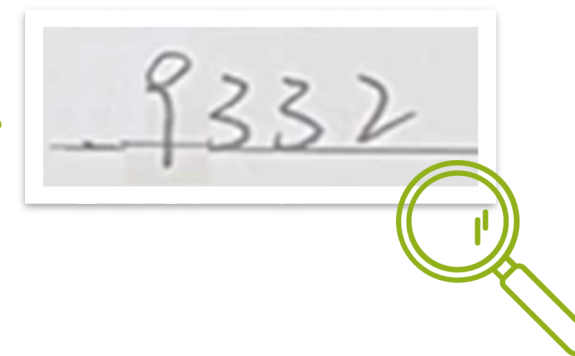
This document is a Chinese harvest licence - it's a forgery

Can you spot how we know that? Hint: you don't need to know any Chinese to spot the problem.

采伐类型: 主伐 采伐方式: — 采伐强度: —
采伐面积: 231亩 公顷(株数: 9332 株)
采伐蓄积: 2115 立方米(出材量: — 立方米)
采伐期限: 2016 年 4 月 16 日至 2016 年 6 月 16 日
更新期限: — 年 — 月 — 日
更新面积: — 公顷(株数: — 株)
☐ 占限额 ☐ 不占限额

Did you see it?

Have a closer look at where it says 9332.



This number is the number of trees that are allowed to be harvested. Look at the magnified version and you'll see the first number – the 9 – appears to have been pasted in. We can see that because the line underneath the 9 does not line up with the rest of the line.

Sometimes documents can end up looking a bit strange because of artefacts that get introduced when the document is scanned. But our suspicions are raised in this case because adding a nine to the beginning of the maximum harvest volume is exactly the sort of alteration a forger would want to make.

Figure 1: A forged Chinese harvest licence



Check for obvious mistakes

Some forgers aren't that great! Look out for basic errors, such as in this CITES permit from Cameroon which gets the full name of CITES wrong. Instead of calling it the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, it calls it the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Flora and Fauna Species. In addition, the certificate lacks a signature and does not include the number of birds being licensed nor their scientific names.

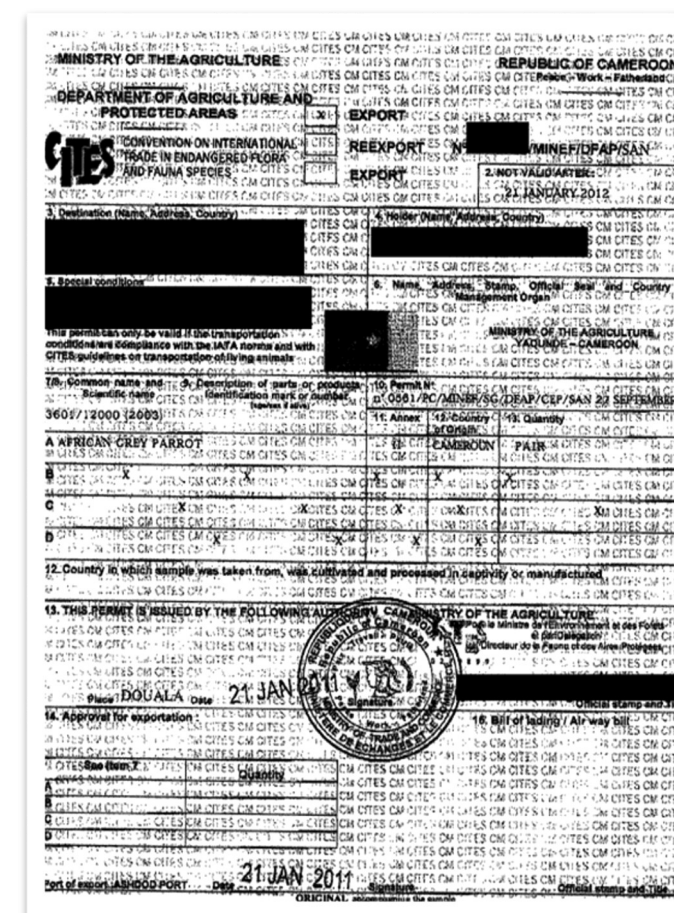
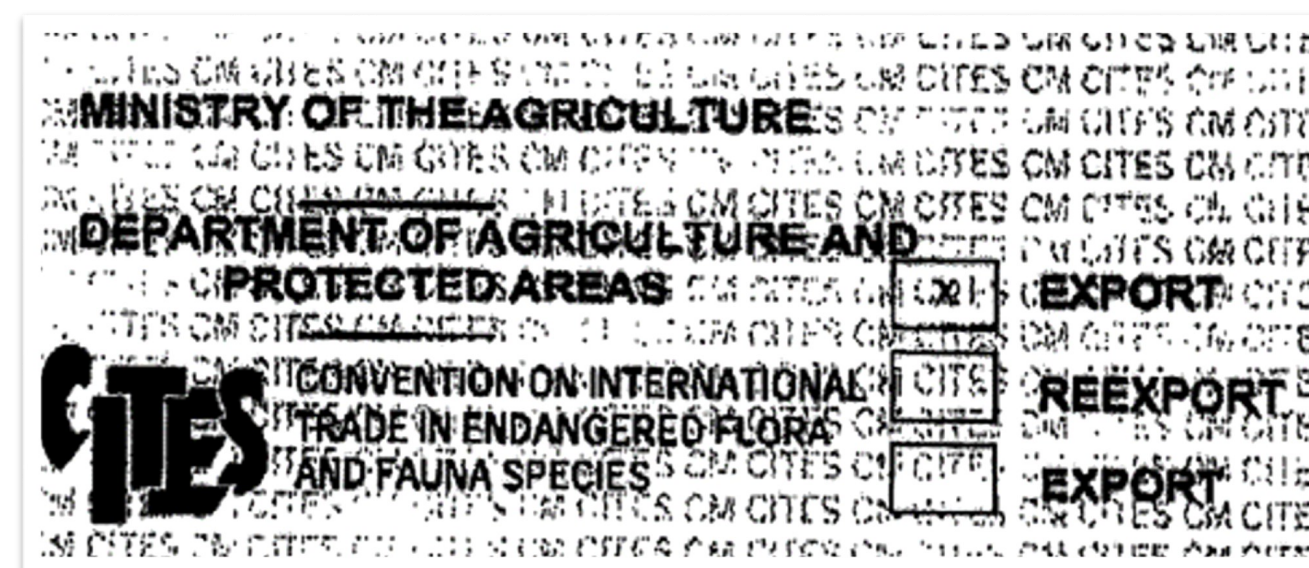


Figure 2: A fake CITES permit from Cameroon, and (below) an enlargement of the title showing the wrong name for CITES



The general advice here is to make sure you're familiar with how the permit you're looking at usually looks. In the case of CITES permits, you could ask your national contact for some samples.

More information on key timber documents coming soon

In autumn 2017, we will be publishing the NEPCon Sourcing Hub, an online guide to help companies assess and mitigate risks of timber illegality. The guide will include detailed risk assessments for 62 timber-producing countries and examples of the most commonly used timber legality documents, including translations of what the key terms on those certificates mean. Watch out on www.nepcon.org for more details.



Check for spelling mistakes and inconsistencies

Spelling mistakes are common in forgeries. A few spelling mistakes in the parts of a form filled in by a company can be excused of course, but spelling mistakes in the form itself are a good indication of forgery.

This document (Figure 3) is a CITES permit from Cameroon where the word category is mis-spelled as 'cartegory'.

Another example we've seen like this is a Russian forest concession agreement between the state and a timber harvesting company. In addition to being full of spelling mistakes, in one place the document said that it was valid for 5 years whereas in another place it said that it was valid for 17 years. We concluded that the document was a fake.

Figure 3: A forged CITES permit from Cameroon, and (below) an enlargement of the mis-spelling of category.



Look out for strange formatting or text that's more blurry than the rest

If a document has been scanned and then doctored, the new text can appear different to the old text – less blurry, in a different font or with strange formatting. Changes like these don't prove that the document is forged. Sometimes scanners can cause artefacts to occur. But observations like these should, nonetheless, raise your suspicions.



Figure 4: A fake certificate of origin.

For example, the document here (Figure 4) is a Certificate of Origin for timber that has allegedly been sent to company in Vietnam. Yet the name and address of the company is in a different font to the rest of the information that has been dulled in. (Compare 'Vietnam' with 'September 14, 2015'. We have redacted the rest of the name and address to maintain anonymity.)

If you come across such documents, we recommend that you:

- go back to your supplier and ask for another copy. If the document was previously scanned, then using a different method of copying, such as taking a photograph, may show you whether the thing that looks odd is present in the original version or not.
- go direct to the company, certification body or government authority that issued the document and ask them.



Check documents against an official database

Some documents from some countries can be checked for validity against an official database. Does the document you've been sent appear on the database?

Does it have the same details as the one on the database? For example, the non-profit Bolsa Verde do Rio (BVRio) runs a website where a variety of forest-related permits in Brazil can be checked. It's at <https://www.bvrio.com/madeira/analise/analise/dashboard.do?language=en> (and available in English, Portuguese and Chinese).

Forest harvest and transport permits from the state of Pará in Brazil can be checked against a database at <http://monitoramento.sema.pa.gov.br/sisflora/> (in Portuguese). Transport permits from Belarus can be checked at <http://blank.bisc.by> (in Russian). The European Commission has a website which companies can use to submit FLEGT licences to their Competent Authorities so that they can be checked. It's at <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/tracesnt>.

Companies certified to most sustainability or legality standards can be checked online as follows:

- FSC at <http://info.fsc.org/certificate.php>
- PEFC at <http://www.pefc.org/find-certified/certified-certificates>
- Veritas' OLB at <http://www.bureauveritas.com/home/about-us/our-business/certification/sector-specific-solutions/forest-wood-products/olb/olb-certification-documents-and-standards>
- Rainforest Alliance's VLC at <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/forestry/verification/transparency/verification-clients>

- NEPCon's LegalSource standard at <http://www.nepcon.org/legalsource-certificates>
- The Indonesian legal wood scheme (Sistem Informasi Legalitas Kaya, SILK) at <http://silk.dephut.go.id/index.php/info/iuiphhk>
- The Indian legal wood scheme (VRIKSH) at http://vrikshindia.in/index.php/user/all_user_list

Such centralised databases are useful and can provide extra assurance that your certificate is genuine. They're not 100% proof though. Any sort of document that comes from a country where the government is known to be corrupt, runs the risk that it could have been issued fraudulently. All electronic database are susceptible to hacking. For example, illegal loggers hacked the Brazilian system in 2008 and falsified documents.

For the certification schemes, you should remember that these databases mostly just show whether a company is certified or not and sometimes describe what material falls within the scope of the certificate; they do not show whether the material you have purchased was certified.



Use computer software to help check PDFs

If you spot something suspicious with a PDF document, you can try using PDF reading software to look for evidence of tampering. A scanned document typically has only one 'object' or 'layer'. In some forged documents, though, you may be able to see the areas that have been over-written in the form of extra 'objects'.

It is important to note though that not all forged documents will have extra objects visible, and not all documents with extra objects visible are fakes. Some PDF converters and scanners use text recognition software which can make a PDF look unnatural. This means that if you see extra objects in a PDF, you should not automatically conclude that it's a fake. Are the extra objects the sort of thing that a forger would want to tamper with? If you ask your supplier to copy the document using a different method and re-send it, does it still look odd?

With those provisos, here's how to reveal whether your PDF has extra 'objects':

- If you're using Adobe Acrobat (the full Acrobat, not Acrobat Reader), go to tools/advanced edits/touch up tool.
- If you're using PDF Converter Professional, click on the touch up tool (it looks like a magnifying glass).

- If you're using Nuance Power PDF, go to edit/edit object.

For example, a Vietnamese factory sent a company some documents as evidence that the timber they were buying came from the United States. One of the documents was an invoice that purportedly came from an American company (Figure 5, overleaf). Our suspicions were raised about the document because of all the spelling mistakes in it, including in its title (where it says 'commercaill invoice' instead of 'commercial invoice'), and because when the PDF is opened the text in the original layer appears for a split second, meaning that the company name appears to change.

[REDACTED]

COMMERCAIL INVOICE

SOLD TO : [REDACTED] INVOICE NO. 259864

VIETNAM OUR ORDER NO. 259864

FAX: +84 [REDACTED]
TEL: +84 [REDACTED]

DATE: AUG. 24th, 2015 ORIGIN: U.S.A.

DELIVERY: CIF FOR. POT HOCHIMINH CITY, VIET NAM

PAYMENT: D/P AT SIGHT

AGAINST THE FOLLOWING NEGOTIABLE DOCUMENTS:

2/1 NEGOTIABLE BILLS OF LADING 1/1 SIGN OF COMMERCAIL INVOICE
1/2 PACKING LIST CERTIFICATE OF ORIGIN
PHYTOSANITARY CERTIFICATE GRADE CERTIFICATE

CCLU [REDACTED] CONTRACT: GH-VN-019

12 BUNDLE * KD 4/4 FSC WHITE OAK #* 26.843 CMB @ USD

TOTAL DUE IN U.S DOLLARS

* ITEMS ARE FSC MIX CREDIT. CER# [REDACTED] COC [REDACTED]
PRODUCT FROM MANAGED & CONTROLLED COURCES

THIS SHIPMENT IS CONERVED WAREHOUSE TO WAREHOUSE UNDER TREVALERS INSURANCE
OCEAN CARGO # OCF [REDACTED] FOR 110% OF THE INVOICES VALUE.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5: A fake invoice, supposedly from an American company.

We analysed this document (Figure 5) as described above and found that almost all of the text had been pasted over an old invoice. The only original parts of the document were the American company's name and logo at the top, and the company president's name and signature at the bottom. The text of the original

invoice could be seen – it had been issued from the American company to the Vietnamese company in 2012.

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGIN

The undersigned [REDACTED] President

ITL, LLC dba [REDACTED] declares

for [REDACTED] that the following mentioned goods shipped on S/S [REDACTED] (Name of Ship)

on the date of SEPTEMBER 14, 2015 consigned to [REDACTED] (Name of Ship)

[REDACTED] Viet Nam

[REDACTED] are the product of the United States of America.

MARKS AND NUMBERS	NO. OF PKGS., BOXES OR CASES	WEIGHT IN KILOS		DESCRIPTION
		GROSS	NET	
[REDACTED]	12 BDLS	24,369		AMERICAN HARDWOOD LUMBER
	12 BDLS	24,369		3/4 WHITE OAK COMSEL KILN DRIED

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGIN

Sworn to [REDACTED] Dated at [REDACTED] on the 23RD day of SEPTEMBER 2015

this [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OHIO (Signature of Officer or Agent)

The [REDACTED], a recognized Chamber of Commerce under the laws of the State of [REDACTED]

We hereby certify to the best of our [REDACTED] has examined the manufacturer's invoice or shipper's affidavit concerning the origin of the merchandise and, according to the best of its knowledge and belief, finds that the products named originated in the United States of America and that all the statements contained are true and correct.

Secretary [REDACTED]

Form 10-600 P Printed and Sold by ENP&C, 150 Baldwin Ave., Jersey City, NJ 07308 • (800) 831-3096 • (201) 795-6400

Figure 6: A fake certificate of origin, supposedly from an American company.

We analysed another document provided by the Vietnamese company using PDF software – a Certificate of Origin (Figure 6; also shown in Figure 4).

As described in tip 3, we found that the name and address of the company the timber was consigned to was in a different font. Analysis with PDF software also showed that this information

was an extra 'object'.

We can't know for sure what happened here, but it seems likely that the Vietnamese company obtained a certificate of origin from another Vietnamese company and forged it to make it appear that it applied to them.

What to do if you think you've got a fake document

If you're suspicious about a document that you've been sent, we recommend that you:

- Go back to the person who sent you the document and ask for another copy. If possible, ask them to send the document via another means – a photo if previously scanned; a scanned version if previously photographed.
- Go direct to the company, certification body or government authority that issued the document and ask them if they can send you an example of what the document should look like.
- Go direct to the company, certification body or government authority that issued the document and ask them if they can confirm whether the document you have is genuine.
- Cross-check the information on the suspicious document with other documents. If the same information appears on documents issued by different authorities, you can be a bit more sure that your document is genuine.
- Ask your supplier if they can explain why the document you have looks weird.
- If you're still not convinced that the document is genuine, you should not use the document as part of your risk assessment and risk mitigation. Unless there is other strong evidence that this timber meets legality requirements, you will not be able to sell it on the EU market. You should make sure that any future consignments from the same supplier are analysed extra carefully.
- If you do come across any documents which you believe to be fakes, you should report them to the relevant issuing authorities.



Free training available on EU Timber Regulation due diligence

We are running some free training courses on the EU Timber Regulation this autumn as part of a [project](#) funded by the LIFE Programme of the European Union and the UK's Department for International Development. At the courses, you'll be able to:

- Find out more about the EU Timber Regulation and how it's being implemented.
- Learn about the NEPCon Sourcing Hub and how it can help make your due diligence easier. The Sourcing Hub provides free information on the risk that timber was sourced in a way that breached harvesting, trade or transport laws in its country of origin. A preview of these risk assessments is available on the NEPCon Sourcing Hub, via www.nepcon.org/sourcinghub. By autumn, information will be available for 62 timber-producing countries, making it the biggest and most detailed collection of forest legality risk assessments that have ever been published.
- Conduct some hands-on exercises to help you learn about the tools and risk assessments available on the NEPCon Sourcing Hub.

[You can sign up for the workshops here](#) – they are free of charge and open to companies in Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, Holland, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Hungary and Spain. Workshops will be held during the course of 2017.

Sign up here!



www.nepcon.org/events

About

Supporting Legal Timber Trade

Supporting Legal Timber Trade is a joint initiative run by NEPCon with the aim of supporting timber-related companies in Europe with knowledge, tools and training in the requirements of the EU Timber Regulation. Knowing your timber's origin is not only good for the forests, but good for business. The joint initiative is funded by the LIFE Programme of the European Union and UK Aid from the UK Government.



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NEPCon (Nature Economy and People Connected) is an international, non-profit organisation that builds commitment and capacity for mainstreaming sustainability. Together with our partners, we foster solutions for safeguarding our natural resources and protecting our climate.

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