FROM GLOBAL OUTLOOK TO REGIONAL RESPONSE:

Advancing the Congo Basin Forest Agenda

A Congo Basin companion paper to Rainforest Foundation Norway's Tropical Deforestation Outlook



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Norway

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Executive summary



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The Congo Basin is approaching a strategic inflection point. It remains the only basin of the three great tropical forest regions that still functions as a strong net carbon sink (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 22; Hubau et al. 2020), but that advantage can no longer be treated as secure. The region has contained, rather than reversed, forest loss; degradation and fire are eroding resilience; and a new wave of mining, energy and infrastructure investment is moving towards final investment decisions while the safeguards that would govern it are still being designed. At the same time, the international climate finance architecture is shifting towards payments for standing forests and verified results. The central question is therefore not whether the Basin still matters in mitigating climate change. The crucial question is whether governments and partners can use their forests to drive sustainable long-term development before today's investments make future forest loss harder to avoid.

Stability without transformation. Permanent deforestation has more than halved on the stricter JRC definition, from 0.87 Mha a year in 2010-2015 to 0.41 Mha in 2021-2025, yet total loss remains high; degradation now exceeds deforestation, and forest-related emissions have not fallen materially for a decade. The easing of forest loss in 2025 is welcome news, but it reflects a return from an exceptional fire year rather than a structural break. Forest loss has

stabilised after the acceleration seen before 2020 (Figure 1), an important milestone, although the evidence presented here cannot separate the contribution of policies and programmes from that of conflict, weak governance or a difficult investment climate. What it does show is that current efforts are not yet strong enough to put the Basin on a credible pathway to the 2030 goal of halting and reversing forest loss. Incremental continuation will preserve the plateau, not secure the sink.

Country-specific strategies are essential for securing the Basin's forests. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the centre of gravity: it accounts for 77% of the Basin's tree-cover loss and 79% of its emissions. Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR) present a different challenge: frontiers where permanent agriculture is accelerating and early action can still prevent higher-loss development models from becoming entrenched. Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of the Congo require a durability proposition that rewards continued stewardship before forest loss accelerates. Across all three tracks, the peatlands of the Cuvette Centrale are a regional asset whose destabilisation would overwhelm annual mitigation gains anywhere else in the Basin.

The risk profile is broadening from chronic livelihood pressure to a more complex political economy of forest conversion. Shifting cultivation and wood energy remain the dominant structural drivers and must stay at the centre of programming. But they increasingly intersect with commodity agriculture, mineral demand, transport infrastructure and a drying climate, and in parts of the region with conflict and weak law enforcement. Fire incidence and forest degradation should not be treated as secondary indicators, but as early warning signals of declining forest resilience and increasing vulnerability to further disturbance (Lapola et al. 2023; Silvério et al. 2019; Besisa Nguba et al. 2025). Mining and infrastructure are not the largest direct drivers, but their indirect effects can reorganise entire landscapes by opening access, encouraging settlement and enabling agricultural expansion, charcoal production and logging. Their overall forest impact may therefore far exceed their direct footprint. The response should address both the immediate drivers of forest loss and the structural conditions that shape land-use decisions: supporting smallholders to increase productivity and incomes without further forest conversion; developing sustainable alternatives to wood energy; strengthening integrated land-use planning and secure community land rights; aligning territorial development and market demand with forest conservation; and establishing financial mechanisms that sustainably increase the value of standing forests.

The next four years could provide a unique opportunity to strengthen forest finance and regulation, rather than simply repeat another programming cycle. The Belém Call to Action for the Congo Basin Forests was signed at COP30 by the Central African countries with their main donor and financial partners (FCLP 2026). Together with the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF) and results-based partnerships, it could align unprecedented resources behind standing forests, verified reductions and community benefits. Access will depend on eligibility, credible measurement, robust and nationally endorsed delivery systems, and evidence that finance reaches landscapes and households. At the same time, a new wave of mining, oil and infrastructure investment is moving towards final investment decisions that could have long-term consequences for forests. Enhanced coordination across the relevant government sectors is therefore essential to ensure that clear red lines and robust safeguards are established.

"The crucial question is whether governments and partners can use their forests to drive sustainable long-term development before today's investments make future forest loss harder to avoid."

PRIORITIES TO 2030

developed in Section 7.2:

Secure the DRC, the Basin's centre of gravity. Promote partnerships anchored in verified results, scalable payments for environmental services, integrated land-use planning to prevent new forest frontiers and interventions that shift the economics of charcoal and agricultural expansion, underpinned by stronger land and forest governance and secure rights for Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Prevent the next frontiers from consolidating. Concentrate prevention in Cameroon and CAR through deforestation monitoring that triggers a response on the ground, support to farmers and supply-chain measures, while timely action can still avoid a transition to permanent, commodity-driven conversion.

Make durability investable. Position Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of the Congo to access standing-forest finance, with Indigenous Peoples and local communities receiving a meaningful and transparent share of benefits.

Set the red lines before investment decisions are locked in. Use strategic spatial planning to restrict development in critical ecosystems, including peatlands and high-integrity forests, ensure Free, Prior and Informed Consent for affected communities, and make finance for mining, oil and infrastructure contingent on safeguards that also assess indirect and cumulative impacts.

Move from monitoring change to managing risk. Track degradation and fire as core warning signs, connect alerts to funded response systems, and direct finance to the landscapes where preventing forest loss delivers the greatest climate and development value.

ABBREVIATIONS AND UNITS

Term	Meaning
CAFI	Central African Forest Initiative
CAR	Central African Republic
CFF	Community Fund for Forests
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EUDR	EU Deforestation Regulation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FPIC	Free, prior and informed consent
GDP	Gross domestic product
GtC / $GtCO_2e$	Gigatonnes of carbon / of CO_2 e quivalent (1 GtC ≈ 3.67 $GtCO_2e$)
HFLD	High forest cover, low deforestation
ICCN	Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
JRC TMF	EC Joint Research Centre Tropical Moist Forest dataset
kha / Mha	Thousand / million hectares
KKGC	Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor
$MtCO_2e$	Million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent
OECMs	Other effective area-based conservation measures
tC/ha	Tonnes of carbon per hectare
TDO	Tropical Deforestation Outlook(parent report)
TFFF	Tropical Forest Forever Facility
RFN	Rainforest Foundation Norway
SBAE	Sample-based area estimation (CAFI-FAO)
WRI	World Resources Institute

Note: Values of 1 Mha or more are given in Mha and smaller values in kha; areas that sources report in km^2 have been converted (1 Mha = 10,000 km^2).

1. Why a Congo Basin companion paper now?

Rainforest Foundation Norway's Tropical Deforestation Outlook (Kuepper et al. 2025, hereafter the TDO) examines how commodity demand, energy transitions, food systems, logging, mining, infrastructure and governance dynamics may shape the future of the world's three major tropical rainforest regions. Its central message for the Congo Basin is that, while forest loss continues to be driven predominantly by small-scale agriculture and wood-energy production linked largely to domestic and local demand, the region faces growing exposure to the same global market forces that transformed the Amazon and Southeast Asia, and that it is not on track to meet the 2030 objective of halting deforestation. This companion paper extends the TDO's global analysis to capture the most recent evidence on drivers, data and policy levers for the Congo Basin. It does not duplicate the parent report: where the TDO is cited, the reader is referred to it.

The scope is the six partner countries of the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI): the DRC, the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Gabon, CAR and Equatorial Guinea, which together hold roughly 170 Mha of rainforest, the second-largest tropical forest block on Earth. The DRC alone holds more than 100 Mha, the largest forest area in Africa and the second-largest tropical forests globally after Brazil (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 22). These forests provide subsistence for some 60 million people and support food security for a further 40 million in nearby urban centres (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 22), and they are the only remaining strong carbon sink among the three largest rainforests (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 22; Hubau et al. 2020).

Forest loss in the Basin differs structurally from the Amazon and Southeast Asia. Where those regions were converted largely by industrial agriculture serving international markets, loss in the Congo Basin remains primarily associated with domestic drivers: shifting cultivation, smallholder expansion, fuelwood and charcoal production, and demographic growth (Section 4). That picture is now evolving. The importance of commodity production as a driver of forest loss may be larger than satellite-based attributions suggest, as these may not fully capture indirect land-use change, displacement effects and progressive forest degradation linked to commodity production (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 22). At the same time, the global energy transition is driving demand for the minerals the Basin holds in quantity, while investments in transport infrastructure, hydrocarbons and industrial agriculture are expanding across several countries (Section 5). These trends have the potential to reshape the current pattern of forest loss in the coming years.

The timing matters. With four years remaining to the 2030 deadline for global deforestation commitments, the Congo Basin stands out as one of the last regions where large-scale forest conversion can still be avoided through preventive rather than corrective action. The paper is written for the governments, donors, civil society organisations and technical partners who will make the decisions that determine whether that remains true.



Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN

2. Recent forest-loss trends, 2016 to 2025

▶ KEY MESSAGES

- Basin tree-cover loss fell 6% in 2025 to 1.67 Mha, but remained 2% above the 2020-2024 average. Exceptionally high fire-related losses made 2024 an outlier, while 2025 was broadly consistent with levels observed over the preceding four years.
- On the stricter JRC TMF measure, permanent deforestation has fallen by more than half since the early 2010s; degradation, however, now exceeds deforestation and reached its highest level since 2020 in 2025.
- The regional aggregate conceals divergence: the DRC and the Republic of the Congo improved in 2025, while Cameroon and CAR deteriorated against both 2024 and their five-year averages.

The headline finding is a stabilised loss, not a reversal. In 2025 the six countries lost a combined 1.67 Mha of tree cover, including 0.74 Mha of primary humid forest, respectively 6% and 5% less than in 2024. Total loss nonetheless remained 2% above the 2020-2024 annual average of 1.64 Mha. The Basin returned to its recent baseline after the fire-inflated peak of 2024, but did not move below it (Table 1, Figure 1).

The Basin's modest improvement contrasts with a much sharper global correction: tropical primary-forest loss fell 36% worldwide in 2025 as the extreme 2024 fire season subsided (WRI 2026), against 5% to 6% in the Congo Basin (Table 1), (WRI 2026).



Photo: Lionel Diss, RFN

BOX 1: THREE WAYS TO MEASURE FOREST LOSS, AND WHY THE NUMBERS DIFFER

This paper draws on three independent datasets that capture different dimensions of forest change. No single dataset fully reflects the complex forest dynamics of the Congo Basin, where permanent deforestation, degradation and temporary clearing can overlap. Used together, they provide a more robust picture of trends: satellite tree-cover loss captures annual canopy disturbance, the JRC product distinguishes degradation from permanent deforestation, and CAFI-FAO estimates provide nationally grounded forest-change figures with quantified uncertainty. Comparing them also helps interpret whether observed increases reflect temporary disturbance, degradation or more permanent forest conversion.

Satellite tree-cover loss (Hansen et al. 2013; Global Forest Watch 2026; 2001-2025) records any loss of canopy above a 30% density threshold, including temporary clearing such as fallow rotation. It is timely, wall-to-wall and internationally comparable, but it is not a direct measure of deforestation.

The Joint Research Centre's Tropical Moist Forest product (Vancutsem et al. 2021; JRC 2026; 1990-2025) distinguishes permanent deforestation from degradation, but only within moist forests.

The CAFI-FAO sample-based area estimates (SBAE; CAFI and FAO 2026; 2015-2023) are produced with national institutions following Shapiro et al. (2025), apply national forest definitions and carry explicit confidence intervals.

Three datasets, one long-term picture[1].

- **Satellite tree-cover loss.** Annual basin-wide loss rose through the 2010s and peaked at 1.83 Mha in 2017. Since 2018 it has fluctuated between 1.50 and 1.77 Mha without a clear downward break.
- **JRC Tropical Moist Forest.** Under the stricter JRC definition the Basin shows genuine improvement: average annual deforestation fell from 0.87 Mha in 2010-2015 to 0.41 Mha in 2021-2025, despite a fire-driven surge to 0.62 Mha in 2024. Degradation, however, now exceeds deforestation, averaging 0.67 Mha per year in 2021-2025 and reaching 0.76 Mha in 2025. Since 1990 the six countries have lost 38.5 Mha of undisturbed moist forest, an 18% decline (JRC 2026).
- **CAFI-FAO sample-based estimates.** The DRC lost an estimated 8.1 ± 0.6 Mha of forest between 2016 and 2023, about 1 Mha per year, with degradation affecting a further 3.7 Mha (SBAE). Cameroon's pattern is degradation-intensive: 2.1 Mha of degradation against 0.8 Mha of deforestation over the same period.

Taken together, the three datasets indicate that forest loss in the Basin is no longer accelerating, and the JRC series points to real progress in reducing permanent conversion during the early 2020s. None, however, supports a conclusion that the trend has structurally reversed. The 2024 fire season showed how quickly a single hot, dry year can erase several years of gains. Degradation, a precursor to both fire and eventual clearing, is not declining at the same pace; and the regional average masks different national trends examined in Section 3. Looking ahead, Yuh et al. (2024) project a further 3.7 to 4.0% loss of dense forest cover across the Basin between 2020 and 2050, about 17.5 to 20.4 Mha, under all three IPCC climate scenarios.

1 The differences are substantial and methodologically valid. For the DRC over 2016-2023, tree-cover loss is 10.5 Mha; the SBAE estimates 8.1 ± 0.6 Mha of deforestation; and the JRC records 3.2 Mha of moist-forest deforestation plus 4.6 Mha of degradation. Each figure is correct within its own definition. This paper uses tree-cover loss for recent annual comparisons, drivers and emissions; the JRC series for long-term trends in deforestation and degradation; and the SBAE where national ownership and confidence intervals matter most.

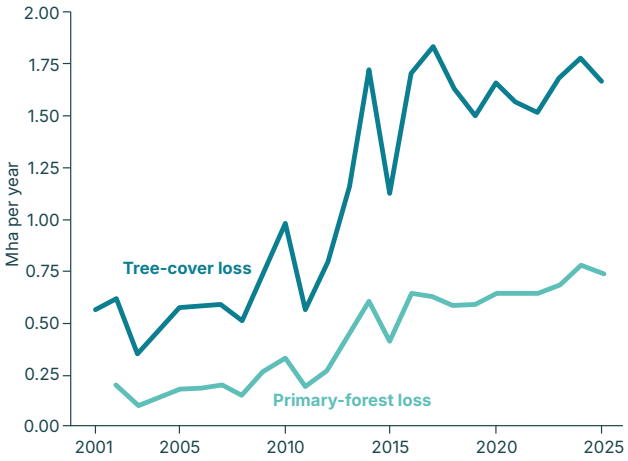
TABLE 1. COUNTRY SNAPSHOT, 2025

Country	Tree-cover loss 2025	vs 2024	vs 2020-24 average	Primary-forest loss 2025	Observed trend
DRC	1.29 Mha	-7%	-1%	559 kha (-5%)	Easing from the 2024 primary-loss record
Cameroon	206 kha	+15%	+14%	105 kha (+10%)*	Rising; national record
Republic of the Congo	71 kha	-38%	-3%	40 kha (-35%)	Post-fire recovery
Gabon	22 kha	-25%	-8%	11 kha (-27%)	Low and stable
CAR	74 kha	+22%	+28%	22 kha (+88%)	Rising; accelerating
Equatorial Guinea	5 kha	-35%	-34%	2.5 kha (-32%)	Low and declining

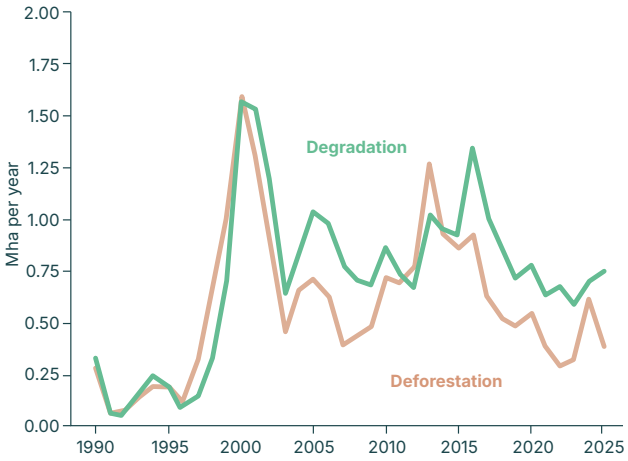
Source: Hansen et al. 2013 and Global Forest Watch 2026, country files, 30% canopy threshold.
* A national record in the 2001-2025 series.

FIGURE 1. BASIN-WIDE FOREST LOSS: TWO MEASURES, NO LONGER RISING BUT NOT YET FALLING

(A) Tree-cover loss, six countries (GFW/Hansen)



(B) Moist-forest deforestation and degradation (JRC TMF)



(C) Change in annual tree-cover loss by country

	DRC	Cameroon	Rep. of Congo	Gabon	CAR	Eq. Guinea
2025 vs 2024	-7%	+15%	-38%	-25%	+22%	-35%
2025 vs 2020-24 avg	-1%	+14%	-3%	-8%	+28%	-34%

Red = loss increased (worsening) · Blue = loss decreased (improving). Tree-cover loss, GFW/Hansen.

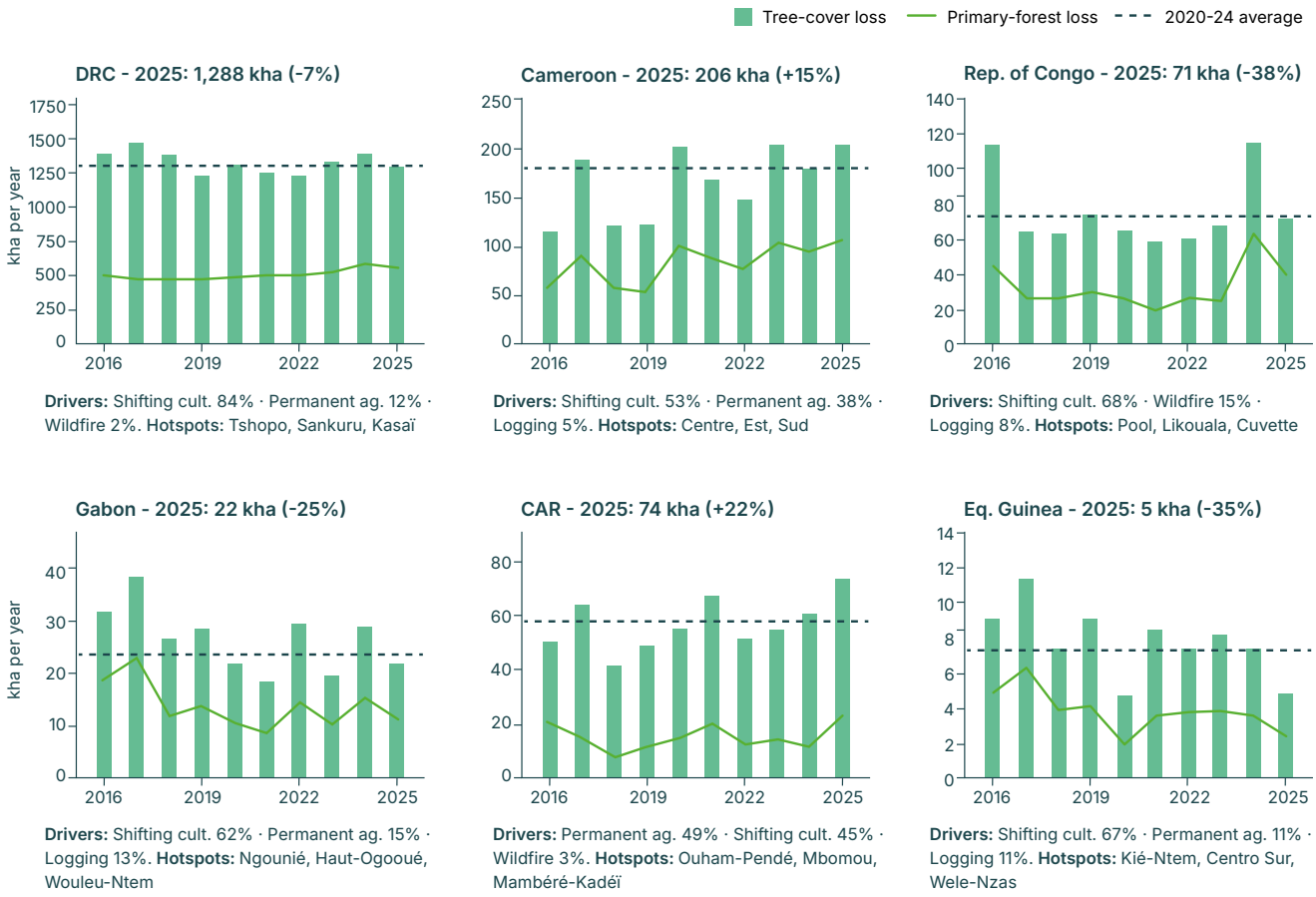
Sources: (A) tree-cover and primary-forest loss, Hansen et al. 2013 and Global Forest Watch 2026; (B) JRC Tropical Moist Forest, Vancutsem et al. 2021 and JRC 2026; (C) computed from (A). Six CAFI countries, 30% canopy threshold.

3. Country-level risk profiles

KEY MESSAGES

- The six countries fall into three groups: a single concentrated centre of loss (DRC), two rising agricultural frontiers (Cameroon, CAR) and three low-loss countries whose exposure to extractive and infrastructure pressure is growing (Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea).
- Current loss and trajectory point in different directions in several countries. CAR's absolute loss is small and its trend the steepest in the Basin; the Republic of the Congo's 2025 improvement is a return from a fire year rather than a durable gain.

FIGURE 2. COUNTRY DASHBOARD: ANNUAL FOREST LOSS, DRIVERS AND HOTSPOTS, 2016-2025



Source: tree-cover and primary-forest loss (kha) from Hansen et al. 2013 and Global Forest Watch 2026; driver shares from Sims et al. 2025 (v1.3); hotspots are the top provinces by 2021-2025 cumulative loss. Percentages in panel titles: 2025 against 2024.



3.1 Democratic Republic of the Congo

DRC RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	1.29 Mha, 77% of Basin total
Trajectory	Flat at a high level
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Shifting cultivation 84%
Principal emerging pressure	Mining and infrastructure; oil blocks over the peatlands; illegal logging; commodity agriculture (palm oil, cocoa)
Profile	Concentrated, high absolute loss
Hotspots 2021-25	Tshopo, Sankuru, Kasaï, Haut-Uele, Maniema, Bas-Uele (SBAE adds Mai-Ndombe, Equateur)

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. The DRC accounts for the largest share of the Basin's forest cover and of its loss: 1.29 Mha of tree cover lost in 2025, 77% of the regional total, and 559 kha of primary forest. Total loss fell 7% from 2024, a record year for primary-forest loss, but only 1% against the five-year average, and non-fire loss reached a record high (WRI 2026). The regional aggregate is therefore dominated by forest loss in the DRC.

The dominant and emerging drivers. Shifting cultivation remains the dominant driver of tree-cover loss across the country (84% over 2016-2025), with permanent agriculture a further 12% (Figure 2); across the region, permanent agriculture is rising (Nkuintchua et al. 2026). In the DRC, these drivers are compounded by underlying pressures including population growth, conflict and insecurity, insecure and competing land rights, and heavy dependence on wood energy. These long-standing pressures increasingly intersect with illegal and unregulated logging, mining and associated infrastructure, in areas so far relatively intact. Mining-driven loss rose from 3.4 kha in 2016 to 22.7 kha in 2025 (Sections 4.2 and 5.1). Additionally, most of the country's peatland now lies inside the oil blocks opened for exploration in 2025 (Section 5.2). The strategic question for the DRC is whether the response to its dominant drivers, shifting cultivation and wood energy, can be scaled while preventing mining, infrastructure and the 2025 oil blocks from opening new frontiers in areas that are still intact (Sections 4, 5.1 and 5.2).

Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN



3.2 Cameroon

CAMEROON RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	206 kha
Trajectory	Rising against 2024 and the five-year average
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Shifting cultivation 53%; permanent agriculture 38%
Principal emerging pressure	Commodity agriculture; infrastructure; displacement
Profile	Rising frontier
Hotspots 2021-25	Centre, Est, Sud

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. Tree-cover loss reached 206 kha in 2025, 15% above 2024 and 14% above the five-year average, and primary-forest loss of 105 kha was a national record (Table 1). The signal is not merely a bad year: it points to an intensifying conversion frontier with a growing permanent-agriculture component.

The dominant and emerging drivers. Permanent agriculture accounted for 38% of loss over 2016-2025, the highest share in the Basin after CAR, alongside shifting cultivation at 53% and logging at 5% (Figure 2). Cocoa and oil-palm expansion, transport infrastructure, logging and demographic growth all press on the forest, compounded by insecurity and weak uptake of community forestry: only around 10% of community forests are under active management (Nkuintchua et al. 2026). The strategic challenge is to meet agricultural and livelihood objectives by directing both smallholder and industrial expansion towards land that is not forest, while preventing transport infrastructure and dormant concessions from opening new forest frontiers (Sections 4, 5.4 and 5.5).

Photo: Shutterstock



3.3 Republic of the Congo

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	71 kha
Trajectory	Recovery from the 2024 fire year
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Shifting cultivation 68%; wildfire 15%
Principal emerging pressure	Oil and pipeline in the north; palm-oil concessions; rail
Profile	Low loss, exposure rising
Hotspots 2021-25	Cuvette, Likouala, Plateaux

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. The Republic of the Congo continues to record low deforestation relative to its forest cover, which stands at around 60% primary forest (Nkuintchua et al. 2026). Tree-cover loss fell 38% in 2025 to 71 kha, but that is a return from a fire year: primary-forest loss had jumped from 24 kha to 62 kha between 2023 and 2024, with half of the increase caused by fire (Nkuintchua et al. 2026), and 2025 loss remained close to the five-year average (Table 1).

The dominant and emerging drivers. Shifting cultivation remains the largest mapped driver, but wildfire is prominent, the highest share in the Basin (Figure 2). The fire-prone forest edge in Cuvette and Likouala adjoins the Cuvette Centrale peatlands, linking local disturbance to globally significant carbon risk (Dargie et al. 2017; Nesha et al. 2024). The emerging pressures are documented in Section 5: palm-oil concessions covering some 500 kha, half the Basin total (Section 5.5); the Pointe-Noire-Ouesso oil pipeline, expected to enter service in 2029 and running towards the Cuvette peatlands (Section 5.2); and the iron-ore railway to Cameroon's Kribi port (Section 5.4). The strategic question for the Republic of the Congo is whether fire management at the forest edge and the siting of the palm-oil, pipeline and railway projects can be settled before they reach the Cuvette peatlands (Sections 5.2, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6).

Photo: Shutterstock / Sergey Uryadnikov



Photo: NRF

3.4 Gabon

GABON RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	22 kha
Trajectory	Low and stable
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Shifting cultivation 62%; logging 13%
Principal emerging pressure	Mining and economic diversification
Profile	Low loss, exposure rising
Hotspots 2021-25	See Figure 2

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. Gabon remains the reference case among high-forest, low-deforestation (HFLD) countries. Primary forest covers 85% of its land area (Nkuintchua et al. 2026), tree-cover loss was 22 kha in 2025, 25% below 2024 and 8% below the five-year average, and emissions fell 6% against the five-year average (Tables 1 and 4). A long-standing network of protected areas and sustainable forest management policies has kept deforestation among the lowest in the tropics.

The dominant and emerging drivers. Logging is proportionally more important than elsewhere in the Basin (Figure 2), which makes the carbon performance of managed concessions directly relevant (Section 5.3). Current forest loss remains among the lowest in the tropics (World Bank 2024b, p. 38), but economic diversification into mining, timber and agriculture could increase pressure on forests, alongside persistent illegal logging (World Bank 2024b, pp. 9 and 40). The strategic question for Gabon is less about current loss than about whether the finance architecture will reward continued stewardship before diversification changes the incentives that have maintained low deforestation (TNC 2024; Section 7.1).



3.5 Central African Republic

CAR RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	74 kha
Trajectory	Steepest rise in the Basin
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Permanent agriculture 49%
Principal emerging pressure	Accessibility and stabilisation; governance capacity
Profile	Rising frontier, low base
Hotspots 2021-25	Mambéré-Kadéï, Lobaye; Ouham-Pendé and Mbomou frontiers

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. CAR's absolute loss is small and its trajectory the steepest in the Basin. Tree-cover loss rose 22% in 2025 to 74 kha, 28% above the five-year average; primary-forest loss rose 88%; and emissions rose 32% against the five-year average (Tables 1 and 4). Much of CAR's loss occurs in savanna-woodland mosaics outside the JRC moist-forest mask, which is why the JRC series shows declining moist-forest deforestation while tree-cover data show acceleration.

The dominant and emerging drivers. CAR is the only Basin country where permanent agriculture already exceeds shifting cultivation as the leading driver (Figure 2). Protracted instability and weak law enforcement have fuelled illegal logging and timber trafficking along road and waterway transit corridors (Ojewale 2023). The medium-term risk is the expansion of permanent agriculture around consumption centres and along transport routes as accessibility improves and areas stabilise. The strategic question for CAR is whether support to farmers and basic forest governance can reach areas that are stabilising before permanent agriculture consolidates along transport routes (Sections 4.1 and 7.1).

Photo: Adobe Stock



3.6 Equatorial Guinea

EQUATORIAL GUINEA RISK PROFILE*	
Current loss (2025)	5 kha
Trajectory	Low and declining
Dominant driver, 2016-2025	Shifting cultivation 67%
Principal emerging pressure	Infrastructure and hydrocarbons; urbanisation
Profile	Low loss, exposure rising
Hotspots 2021-25	Kié-Ntem, Centro Sur, Wele-Nzas; Bioko separate

*Profiles combine three criteria: current loss relative to forest area, direction of the 2025 trend against the 2020-2024 average, and the scale of the emerging pressures documented in Section 5. Sources: Tables 1 and 3, Sections 4 and 5.

The trajectory. Equatorial Guinea has one of the highest levels of forest cover in the Basin, about 87% of its territory, second in Africa behind Gabon (World Bank 2024a), with primary forest at around 80% of land area (Nkuintchua et al. 2026). Tree-cover loss was 5 kha in 2025, 35% below 2024 and 34% below the five-year average (Table 1). The economy remains dependent on hydrocarbons, which accounted for 39% of GDP in 2023 (World Bank 2024a).

The dominant and emerging drivers. Shifting cultivation remains the largest mapped driver, followed by logging and permanent agriculture, none at a scale comparable with the region's major frontiers. The pressures are infrastructure, oil and gas activity and urbanisation around the main economic centres. Because loss follows the road network, degradation is a more visible signal than clearing, and infrastructure planning is the most relevant entry point for prevention. Oil and gas revenue has funded significant infrastructure; without land-use planning and other regulatory safeguards it could accelerate fragmentation. Equatorial Guinea can still act before the dynamics observed elsewhere take hold (World Bank 2024a). The strategic question for Equatorial Guinea is whether land-use planning and regulatory safeguards are put in place while loss is still low, so that infrastructure spending does not become the frontier it has become elsewhere (Sections 5.4 and 7.1).

Photo: Adobe Stock

4. What is driving forest loss?

KEY MESSAGES

- Shifting cultivation accounted for 78% of tree-cover loss in 2016-2025, confirming that loss in the Basin remains primarily linked to smallholder agriculture and wood-energy demand.
- Permanent agriculture accounted for 16% of loss, but already leads in CAR and is expanding rapidly in Cameroon, the Basin's clearest emerging commodity frontier.
- Wildfire stood 82% above its recent average in 2025 and mining-driven loss roughly doubled. Their shares remain small; they are the fastest-growing risks.

Effective action depends on distinguishing the forces that dominate forest loss from those that are growing fastest. This section combines the WRI and Google DeepMind Global Drivers of Forest Loss model (Sims et al. 2025; version 1.3, 2001-2025), which attributes a dominant driver to each square kilometre of loss, with the country evidence in Section 3 and the market pressures examined in Section 5.

4.1 The structural picture, 2016-2025

Shifting cultivation (12.9 Mha, 78%). Rotational smallholder agriculture, forest-fallow systems and charcoal production form the Basin's dominant structural driver, reinforced by population growth, poverty, fragmentation and limited livelihood and energy alternatives. The figure is not homogeneous: where cultivation rotates within established forest-fallow mosaics, much of the mapped loss is followed by regrowth and is not permanent deforestation (Box 1), but shortening fallow periods and expansion into primary forest under population pressure are turning what was a cyclical system into a more permanent source of loss (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 23). The DRC's energy system remains highly dependent on bioenergy, which accounts for approximately 95% of the national energy mix (IEA 2019). This profile differs from the commodity frontiers of the Amazon and Southeast Asia and calls for a distinct response (Section 7.1), with productivity gains one lever among several rather than the lever: near frontiers and under weak governance, yield gains can induce a rebound of expansion and intensify agro-chemical use (Kuepper et al. 2025).

Permanent agriculture (2.6 Mha, 16%). It already accounts for 49% of loss in the Central African Republic and 38% in Cameroon, and its contribution is increasing in both. In 2025 it was associated with 291,000 hectares of forest loss, 11% above the 2020-2024 average and 17% of that year's total (Sims et al. 2025). Because the drivers model does not distinguish crops (Sims et al. 2025), attribution to cocoa and oil palm relies on complementary evidence, including the substantial increase in reported cocoa production in the DRC between 2015 and 2023 (FAO 2025) and the concession records in Section 5.5.

Wildfire, logging, mining and settlements (2% or less each). Their regional shares are modest, yet their impacts are geographically concentrated and often fall on high-value forest. Wildfire is most prominent in the Republic of the Congo, at 15% of national loss, in savanna-forest mosaics. Logging is proportionally most significant in Gabon (13%), Equatorial Guinea (11%) and the Republic of the Congo (8%), and reached its highest level in the series in 2025, at 42 kha. Mining is concentrated in eastern DRC; settlement expansion follows the urban and transport routes around Kinshasa and Douala.

TABLE 3. DRIVERS OF TREE-COVER LOSS BY COUNTRY, 2016-2025

Country	Loss 2016-2025	Top driver	Second driver	Third driver
DRC	13.2 Mha	Shifting cultivation 84%	Permanent agriculture 12%	Wildfire 2%
Cameroon	1.7 Mha	Shifting cultivation 53%	Permanent agriculture 38%	Logging 5%
Republic of the Congo	0.8 Mha	Shifting cultivation 68%	Wildfire 15%	Logging 8%
Gabon	0.3 Mha	Shifting cultivation 62%	Permanent agriculture 15%	Logging 13%
CAR	0.6 Mha	Permanent agriculture 49%	Shifting cultivation 45%	Wildfire 3%
Equatorial Guinea	0.1 Mha	Shifting cultivation 67%	Logging 11%	Permanent agriculture 11%

Source: computed from Sims et al. 2025 (v1.3), country files. Tree-cover loss, 30% canopy threshold.

4.2 A change in 2025: the composition is shifting

Total loss in 2025 stayed close to the 2020-2024 average, but its composition changed in ways that may prove more consequential than the headline.

- **Wildfire: 67 kha, 82% above the 2020-2024 average.** Wildfire accounted for 4% of Basin-wide loss in 2025, twice its share over the full decade, and 2025 was the second-worst fire year in the series after 2024 (100 kha). Two consecutive extreme fire years, concentrated along the savanna-forest interface in the Republic of the Congo and the DRC, are consistent with the documented drying of the Basin and point to an emerging climate-fire feedback (Section 5.6).

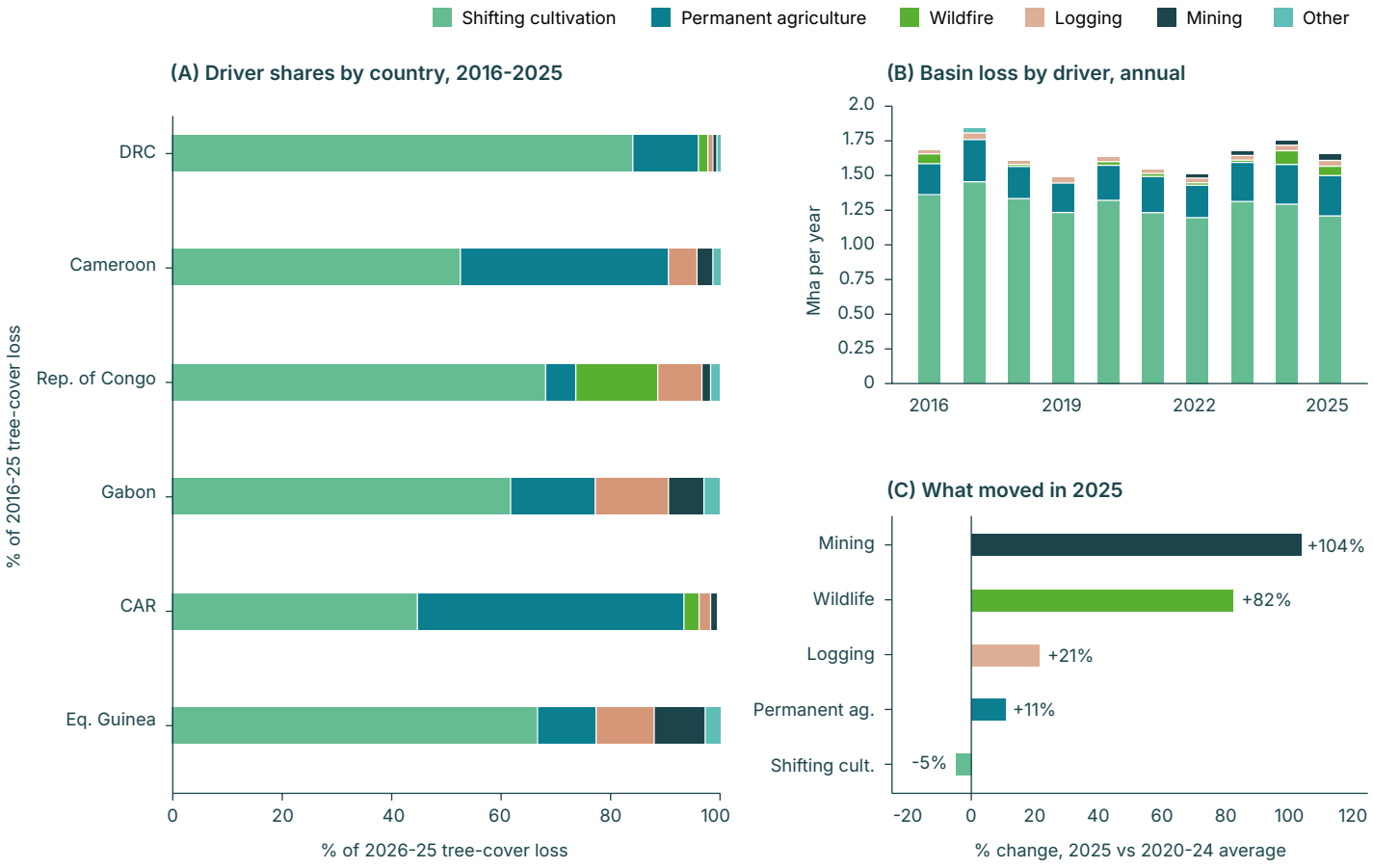


Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN

- **Mining ("hard commodities"):** 41 kha, roughly double the 2020-2024 average. Mining reached its highest recorded share of Basin-wide loss in 2025, 2.4%. This is a sustained rise rather than a one-year spike, from 11 kha in 2020 (Figure 3). In the DRC, mining-driven loss has increased nearly sevenfold since 2016. Mining's indirect footprint is far larger than its direct one: across sub-Saharan Africa each hectare of direct mining deforestation is estimated to trigger about 34 hectares of additional forest loss within five years through the roads, settlement and farming that follow (Morton et al. 2026).
- **Shifting cultivation:** 1.21 Mha, 5% below the 2020-2024 average. Its share of annual loss fell from 78% over the decade to 73% in 2025, continuing a decline visible since 2018. A modest easing in the DRC more than offset increases in CAR and Cameroon. The driver nevertheless remains dominant by a wide margin and should not be displaced from the centre of policy attention.

Smallholder-driven loss remains the dominant pattern in the Basin, and it is now being joined by faster-growing risks. Commodity agriculture, wildfire and mining still account for far less area than shifting cultivation, but each can accelerate rapidly with commodity prices, mineral demand or a dry season, and their impacts fall on some of the Basin's most valuable landscapes: peatlands, intact forests and carbon-dense frontiers. In the TDO's terms this moves the region closer to the "pressured expansion" pathway (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 120-121).

FIGURE 3. DRIVERS OF FOREST LOSS: STRUCTURAL SHARES AND THE 2025 SHIFT



Source: computed from Sims et al. 2025 (v1.3). "Other" combines settlements, infrastructure and other natural disturbances.

5. Emerging pressures and future risks

KEY MESSAGES

- The pressures the TDO identified for the Basin are now measurable in the loss data: mining at a record share, two extreme fire years, permanent agriculture at its second-highest level in the decade.
- The largest risks are indirect. Roads, railways, pipelines and power for mining reorganise access, settlement and land values across whole landscapes; the mine or the well is rarely the main source of loss.
- The DRC's 2025 oil licensing round is one of the most consequential decisions still open: 52 blocks over 124 Mha, covering most of the country's peatland and 72% of the Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor.

The TDO provides the detailed analysis of mining, hydrocarbons, timber and infrastructure pressures across the Congo Basin. Rather than reproduce that analysis, this section highlights the developments and evidence that have changed, become measurable or acquired greater policy significance since the TDO was completed (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 40-41, 57, 83-86 and 110-113).



Photo: Lionel Diss, RFN

BOX 2: THE CONGO BASIN AT A CROSSROADS: TWO PATHWAYS ARE OPEN

The Congo Basin still retains much of its ecological integrity, but the TDO is explicit that this is no guarantee of future stability. Under a managed transition, stronger governance, land-use planning and responsible supply chains would let countries grow while keeping most of their forest capital, and conservation becomes a development asset rather than a constraint. Under pressured expansion, demand for timber, minerals, food and energy outpaces governance, and new roads, mines, farms and settlements open intact landscapes, with indirect effects such as migration, charcoal and informal logging outweighing the direct footprint of any single investment. The Basin has not yet locked into either pathway; the decisions taken this decade will decide which it follows (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 120-121).

5.1 Mining and critical minerals

Mining remains a small direct driver, at 1% of Basin loss over the decade, but its share doubled to 2.4% in 2025 and the DRC series has risen nearly sevenfold since 2016 (Section 4.2). The reason to treat it as a first-order risk is what surrounds the mine rather than the mine itself: the agriculture, settlements and other ancillary activities that follow (Morton et al. 2026).

The DRC's mineral endowment and expanding transport and energy infrastructure create a substantial indirect forest risk. Although most large-scale mines remain outside the rainforest, exploration permits, artisanal extraction and infrastructure serving mineral production can open previously remote landscapes to settlement, agriculture, charcoal production and logging. The Lobito Corridor may reinforce these dynamics by lowering transport costs and encouraging further investment. Almost 12% of the DRC is covered by industrial mining titles, of which almost 10 Mha overlap with forest (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 40); the underlying mineral geography, concession data and market outlook are examined in the TDO (pp. 40-41).

5.2 Oil and gas

Oil and gas development creates its greatest forest risk where licensing and infrastructure overlap with peatlands, high-integrity forests and community lands. The most consequential recent development is the DRC's 2025 licensing round: 52 blocks covering more than 124 Mha, including most of the Congolese portion of the Cuvette Centrale peatlands and 72% of the Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 57; Earth Insight 2025). The Corridor, a conservation and development reserve of 54.43 Mha established by decree in January 2025, is introduced in the box in Section 5.4. In the Republic of the Congo, the proposed Pointe-Noire-Ouesso pipeline and continued exploration in the Cuvette add a further infrastructure risk. The TDO documents the wider regional distribution of concessions and wells (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 57 and 113). Additionally, the Ngoki permit in the Republic of the Congo keeps over 600 kha of peatland under exploration (Cannon 2020), while Gabon's exploration strategy now centres on deep and ultra-deep offshore acreage, with 2025 agreements with ExxonMobil and BP (AFP 2025; Ecofin Agency 2025). The immediate priority is to reconcile licensing decisions with peatland protection, land-use planning, community rights and forest safeguards before investment is locked in.

5.3 Logging and timber

Logging accounts for a modest share (ca. 2%) of directly attributed tree-cover loss but has a larger influence through degradation (Section 2), road construction (Section 5.4) and the opening of remote forests. Illegal and unregulated operations, contested concessions and weak enforcement remain central concerns, particularly in the DRC and Cameroon (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 85 and 99); conflict in the north-east of the DRC enables trafficking of protected hardwoods worth hundreds of millions of dollars into neighbouring countries; a 2018 investigation found the



Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN



largest concession holder in the DRC was operating illegally on 90% of its area, while in Cameroon a criminal network was found moving timber to illicit markets in Nigeria, Vietnam and China (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 84). However, recent evidence indicates that well-managed concessions can retain substantially more carbon than forests affected by unmanaged degradation or slash-and-burn expansion (Sagang et al. 2026). The policy priority is therefore not to treat all logging as equivalent, but to enforce legality, management requirements, traceability and community safeguards while preventing concession roads from driving wider forest conversion.

Market demand for high-value species is expected to remain strong, posing continued risks to the Congo Basin given the persistent enforcement challenges described above. Demand for tropical timber is shifting to Asia, with rising exports to China and other Asian markets with weaker or non-existent sustainability and processing requirements, making those markets more accessible as other markets tighten controls. Much timber is processed in Asia before finished goods reach other markets, risking a potential loophole for illegal timber to enter markets despite regulatory measures such as the EUDR (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 85 and 92).

The counter-evidence matters for policy: well-managed logging concessions in the Basin still function as a net carbon sink, with logged forests holding 8% less above-ground carbon than old growth, against differences of up to 50% for slash-and-burn and unmanaged degradation (Sagang et al. 2026). While forest operations can generate indirect impacts, particularly through road construction and the increased accessibility of remote forest areas, the primary threats stem from illegal practices and the weak enforcement of forest governance and regulatory frameworks.

5.4 Infrastructure

Infrastructure is likely to do more than any other single investment to shape where future deforestation occurs in the Basin. It opens new forest, acting as a catalyst that simultaneously enables agricultural expansion, logging, mining and urbanisation. The TDO documents the scale of planned road development and major regional projects, including the Lobito Corridor and the Cameroon–Republic of the Congo iron-ore railway (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 110–112). The companion paper's added conclusion is that these projects should be assessed at landscape scale, with cumulative-impact assessment, land-use planning, tenure safeguards and monitoring of indirect forest loss established before investment decisions are finalised.

The Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor illustrates both the opportunity and the exposure. By linking conservation objectives with investment in transport, agriculture and green economic development, it could become a flagship for

Photo: Shutterstock

reconciling growth with forest protection across a vast territory (Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor n.d.). Its credibility will depend on securing customary land rights, equitable benefit-sharing and the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities throughout planning and implementation. As 72% of the Green Corridor area overlaps with the oil blocks offered in the 2025 licensing round (Earth Insight 2025), aligning the two will be central to the coherence between the DRC's forest and climate ambitions and its investment decisions in other sectors.

BOX 3: KIVU-KINSHASA GREEN CORRIDOR

The Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor (KKGC) was established by Decree 25/01 of 15 January 2025, under the 2014 nature conservation law as amended in December 2024, as a 54.43 Mha protected area of a new "community reserve" category spanning the Kivus to Kinshasa (RDC 2025). ICCN supervises it and delegates its management under a public-private partnership contract (RDC 2025, Art. 8; Climate Home News 2025); pre-existing community and third-party rights stand until zoning follows a public inquiry, and projects requiring an impact study are subject to the free, prior and informed consent of local communities and Indigenous Pygmy peoples (RDC 2025, Arts. 4 and 5). Its implementation also provides an opportunity to advance the DRC's commitments under the Intergovernmental Land Tenure Commitment, which it signed at COP30 (FCLP 2025; Hanbury 2025), linking landscape-scale conservation with stronger recognition and security of community land and resource rights.

5.5 Industrial agriculture and oil palm

Industrial agriculture remains limited in the Basin. Palm oil is traditionally produced by smallholders at low yields for local markets, and even the larger producers, Cameroon, the DRC and Gabon, import palm oil to meet food demand (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 74). The region has nonetheless been identified as a potential new frontier for oil-palm expansion since the late 2000s, driven by land pressure in the main Southeast Asian producing countries and rising local and international demand. More than 280 Mha of suitable land has been identified, mostly in the DRC, Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, and national policies favour increased production (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 74). Several land deals were already made in the late 2000s; concession areas cover over 1 Mha, including 500 kha in the Republic of the Congo and just above 200 kha each in Cameroon and the DRC, often overlapping community lands and prompting local opposition. Only a fraction has been developed, but dormant concessions can become active quickly (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 74-75).

The permanent-agriculture share in Cameroon (38%) and CAR (49%), and its 2025 rise to 291 kha Basin-wide (Section 4), show that the commodity frontier is already forming on the ground, mainly through cocoa and food crops. For export commodities like cocoa, demand-side due diligence measures like the EUDR (European Union 2023) could make a tangible difference to deforestation and market incentives.

5.6 Climate-fire feedbacks

Fire is both a clearing tool and a driver of loss in its own right: wildfire accounted for 4% of Basin tree-cover loss in 2025, twice its share over the decade (Section 4.2). What is new is the coincidence of two extreme fire years: 100 kha of fire-driven loss in 2024 and 67 kha in 2025 against a 2020-2023 average of 21 kha. This comes against a backdrop of a climate that is measurably drying: satellite records show a widespread decline in canopy greenness over the Congo rainforest (Zhou et al. 2014) and a lengthening of the boreal-summer dry season (Jiang et al. 2019), and the Basin's forests are experiencing rising temperature and more frequent drought (Worden et al. 2026). Globally, fire accounted for 42% of tree-cover loss in 2025 (WRI 2026). The savanna-forest interface in the Republic of the Congo (where fire is already the second driver of loss) and the DRC is where the feedback is most visible: degraded and fragmented forest dries faster, burns more readily and degrades further. The peatlands are the extreme case, where a drying or burning landscape would convert a stock outside the annual ledger into a flow (Section 6). Fire-risk management and the protection of forest resilience therefore belong in the core of the response, not at its margin.

6. Climate implications

KEY MESSAGES

- Basin emissions from tree-cover loss have been flat at around 1.1 $GtCO_2e$ per year for a decade; the DRC produces 79% of the total. Cameroon (+12%) and CAR (+32%) are the rising emitters, and both increases track their agricultural frontiers.
- The Basin remains a net carbon sink overall, but a weakening one. Its climate value lies as much in loss avoided as in loss reduced, which is what instruments such as the TFFF and results-based partnerships are designed to pay for.
- The peatlands of the Cuvette Centrale hold roughly 29 GtC, outside the annual ledger, and most of the DRC part lies inside the 2025 oil blocks.

Emissions are stable at a persistently high level. Gross emissions from tree-cover loss reached 1.10 $GtCO_2e$ in 2025, just above the 2020-2024 average of 1.08 $GtCO_2e$ and below the fire-driven 1.17 $GtCO_2e$ of 2024. Over the decade the series has oscillated between 0.99 and 1.17 $GtCO_2e$ with no downward trend: current mitigation effort has stabilised emissions but not reduced them. The metric counts gross emissions on loss pixels only (Harris et al. 2021, 30% threshold; see Annex A for exclusions). It does not capture losses that leave the canopy standing: in one global satellite biomass dataset, degradation accounts for about 93% of gross aboveground biomass loss across the Congo Basin since 2000, as that dataset defines it, counting losses from fire, selective logging and tree mortality that do not clear the canopy (Chloris Geospatial 2026).

The DRC accounts for the lion's share of emissions. It emitted 867 $MtCO_2e$ in 2025, 79% of the Basin total and nearly four times the other five countries combined, essentially unchanged from its recent average. Cameroon (130 $MtCO_2e$, +12% against its average) and CAR (39 $MtCO_2e$, +32%) are the rising signals, consistent with Section 4, while the Republic of the Congo and Gabon eased.

TABLE 4. GROSS EMISSIONS FROM TREE-COVER LOSS, 2025

Country	Emissions 2025 ($MtCO_2e$)	Share	vs 2020-24 average	Average carbon density (tC/ha)
DRC	867	79%	0%	101
Cameroon	130	12%	+12%	109
Republic of the Congo	44	4%	-5%	116
Gabon	15	1%	-6%	127
CAR	39	4%	+32%	68
Equatorial Guinea	3.5	0.3%	-33%	128

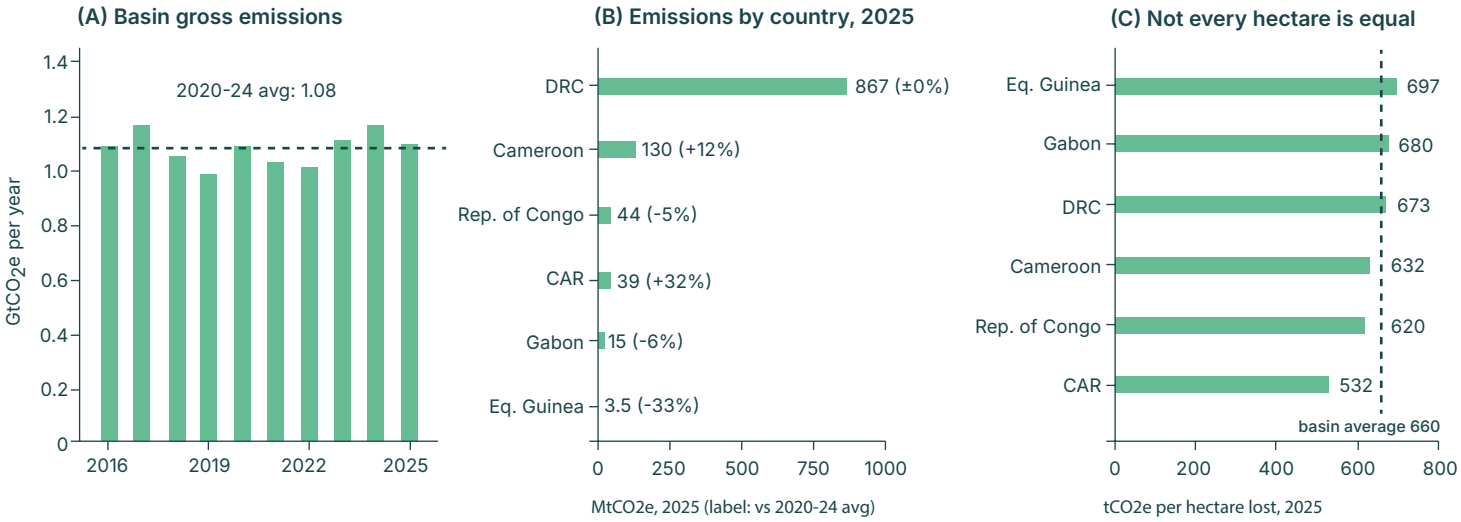
Source: computed from Harris et al. 2021 flux model, Global Forest Watch 2026 country carbon files, 30% threshold. Carbon density is above-ground carbon stock in 2000 per hectare of tree cover.

Not every hectare is equal. Losses associated with shifting cultivation and logging occur disproportionately in relatively carbon-rich forests (Sims et al. 2025). Targeting should therefore consider not only how many hectares are protected, but also where those hectares are located and how much carbon they contain. Avoiding forest loss in the dense forests of northern DRC, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon may deliver particularly high climate benefits because these landscapes contain some of the Basin's most carbon-dense forests and significant remaining carbon stocks (Sagang et al. 2026; Worden et al. 2026).

The sink is the bigger prize, and it is contested. Gross emissions are only half the balance sheet: in the flux model the six countries still remove more carbon than their forest loss emits, a net sink of roughly 0.5 $GtCO_2e$ per year on average over 2001-2025 (Harris et al. 2021; Global Forest Watch 2026), and the Basin's intact forests have held up as a sink longer than the Amazon's (Hubau et al. 2020). A recent synthesis nonetheless describes it as a weak sink, 0.26 to 0.50 GtC per year since 1980, under rising temperature and drought (Worden et al. 2026). The Basin's climate value therefore lies as much in the loss that does not happen, in Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the peatlands, as in reductions where loss is high. That is the logic of the standing-forest and results-based finance discussed in Section 7.1[2].

Peatlands represent one of the Congo Basin's most significant climate assets, safeguarding a vast carbon stock far exceeding annual forest-loss emissions. The Cuvette Centrale holds an estimated 29 GtC, roughly 106 $GtCO_2e$ if released (Crezee et al. 2022). For scale, that stock is roughly a century of the Basin's current emissions from forest loss, which is why peatland stability outweighs annual mitigation gains anywhere else in the Basin. Forest loss on peat remains small, 239.1 kha or 1.4% of the peatland area over 2001-2021, but it is accelerating, with 86% of the DRC's peat-area losses occurring after 2011 and new threats, including large-scale rice cultivation, now documented (Jenkins et al. 2025).

FIGURE 4. GROSS EMISSIONS FROM TREE-COVER LOSS: FLAT TOTAL, CONCENTRATED SOURCES, UNEQUAL HECTARES



Source: computed from Harris et al. 2021 and Global Forest Watch 2026. Panel C divides 2025 gross emissions by 2025 tree-cover loss per country.

2 Net flux: GFW country carbon sheets (≈ −546 $MtCO_2e$/yr across the six countries). Intact-forest sink: Hubau et al. (2020), Nature 579; Worden et al. (2026), Global Change Biology.

7. From evidence to action

KEY MESSAGES

- The Congo Basin is one of the last major tropical forest regions where large-scale conversion can still be prevented rather than repaired, and prevention is generally cheaper than restoration.
- The response sets out what governments, donors, markets and companies can do to change the trajectory (7.1), and the five priorities to 2030 that follow from the evidence (7.2).
- Decisions between now and 2030 will shape the Basin's forests for decades.

The evidence in Sections 2 to 6 points to a region that has stabilised forest loss without transforming its drivers, and whose exposure to a new set of pressures is growing faster than its safeguards. Efforts are underway to mobilise greater international support for the Basin, including through CAFI. The challenge is to translate these commitments into measurable results on the ground, with greater coherence between public policies, investment decisions and local realities. The TDO sets out broadly applicable recommendations; this section translates them into differentiated priorities for the Congo Basin (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 125–129).

7.1 Response pathways for governments, commercial actors, donors, and civil society

Responsibility for the Basin's forests is shared. Congo Basin governments decide how land is allocated and how rules are enforced. Donors and finance institutions shape the incentives. Consumer markets and companies drive part of the demand, including for the minerals of the energy transition. Indigenous Peoples, local communities and civil society hold rights and carry much of the day-to-day stewardship. The options below are offered to each group for consideration; their relevance and sequencing will differ by country (Section 3).

Governments in the Basin

- ***Rural transformation at scale.*** Shifting cultivation and wood energy drive about three-quarters of loss (Section 4.1). Governments and their partners could therefore concentrate on the combination that changes their economics: agricultural support and secure fallow systems; sustainable wood-energy supply together with cleaner cooking in the main cities; alternative livelihoods where extraction is informal; and community-led economic models. Productivity gains should be pursued alongside tenure security and land-use agreements, so that they do not induce further expansion into forest (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 127).
- ***Land-use planning as the integrating instrument***. Integrated land-use planning can help reconcile conservation and development objectives by giving infrastructure, mining, agricultural and forestry decisions a common framework that shows where development can proceed as well as where it should not. Governments could use it to establish clear restrictions, with buffers, on extraction, agro-industrial concessions and major infrastructure in peatlands, primary and other high-conservation-value forests, intact forest landscapes and protected areas, and on the lands of Indigenous Peoples and local communities without their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 126). Corridor-level and cumulative-impact assessment, participatory zoning and monitoring of land-use change turn a plan into a safeguard. They are most effective when applied before oil, mining and infrastructure decisions are locked in, as they still can be for the 2025 oil round and the mineral corridors.
- ***Tenure and rights.*** Securing Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' land and forest rights is an essential lever for forest protection. Governments could accelerate



Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN



recognition, drawing on the DRC's (RFN 2022) and the Republic of the Congo's laws on Indigenous Peoples' rights and on the Intergovernmental Land Tenure Commitment (FCLP 2025). The practical instruments are FPIC, with adequate time and independent facilitation, community forestry and OECMs.

- ***Strengthen the evidence on drivers and actors.*** The drivers model used in Section 4 assigns one dominant driver per square kilometre and does not distinguish crops, actors or indirect effects (Sims et al. 2025), and commodity-linked loss may be underestimated where it occurs within farming mosaics (Goldman and Molinario 2020). Governments and partners could strengthen nationally owned monitoring systems, building for instance on the sample-based estimates already produced with FAO, so that they distinguish customary rotational farming from commercial clearing, track degradation and the indirect effects of mining and infrastructure, and combine field evidence with remote sensing. Better attribution would help target responses where they are most effective and fair, and would strengthen the measurement on which results-based and standing-forest finance depend.
- ***Governance and enforcement.*** Strengthened legal frameworks integrating formal and customary law, adequately funded law enforcement, public access to near-real-time deforestation alerts and protection for environmental defenders, including safe grievance mechanisms, are the governance elements the TDO identifies (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 126-127). Given the concession record in Section 5.3, enforcing existing decisions before new permits are issued may be the higher-return step.
- ***Fire and resilience.*** Early warning, fire prevention and the natural regeneration of degraded forest could be built into landscape strategies as resilience measures in their own right (Section 5.6).

Donors and climate-finance institutions ▸

Finance has tended to favour areas of rapid loss while offering fewer incentives to countries that keep forests standing, even though Gabon and Equatorial Guinea generate climate benefit through the stocks they preserve (Section 6). How finance is delivered matters as much as how much is delivered. Donors and finance institutions could:

Photo: Alexis Huguet, RFN

- ***Align flows with both risk and carbon value.*** Concentrate reduction finance where loss and emissions are concentrated (the DRC) and where frontiers are expanding (Cameroon, CAR), while scaling standing-forest finance for the low-loss countries through results-based partnerships and payments for environmental services.
- ***Make durability investable.*** Where governments choose to forgo extraction in peatlands or other high-integrity forests, financial incentives must be sufficiently large, long-term and predictable to make that choice politically and economically credible. The Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), together with the Belém Call, represents the first attempt to create a large-scale, sustained financial mechanism that rewards countries for maintaining standing forests. In the near term, donor support could help countries prepare for participation through investments in eligibility requirements, forest monitoring systems, delivery mechanisms and equitable benefit-sharing arrangements. At the same time, countries will need to determine how TFFF revenues will interact with results-based payments and emerging Article 6 carbon market opportunities, as these choices could have significant implications for future forest finance strategies.
- ***Deliver predictably and through national systems.*** Disburse commitments on time, align with national plans and delivery systems where possible, and report transparently on what reaches landscapes, communities and households.
- ***Fund prevention.*** Land-use planning, tenure security, governance reform and sustainable agriculture are generally less costly than addressing advanced degradation.
- ***Integrate forest safeguards into infrastructure and mining finance.*** All lenders and guarantors of corridors, mines, pipelines and power, including those outside the traditional donor group, could require corridor-level assessment, buffers, monitoring of indirect impacts and restoration obligations as conditions of finance (Kuepper et al. 2025, p. 127).
- ***Reach communities.*** Funding for Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' tenure and forest management amounted to less than 1% of climate ODA over 2011-2020, and only about 17% of the projects identified named an IPLC organisation (RFN 2021). Emerging mechanisms such as the Community Fund for Forests (CFF) and Payment for Environemental Services (PES), designed and managed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities in the DRC, show how support can reach communities more directl. Increasing the flow of finance to local actors will, however, require sustained investment in the organisational capacity of national and local rights-holder organisations (RFN and RRI 2026, p. 11). More predictable, accessible and long-term direct finance is a condition of the rights-based approach this section assumes.

Consumer markets, companies and financiers ▸

Consumer economies share responsibility through their demand for cocoa, palm oil, timber and the minerals of the energy transition. Demand-side instruments have most purchase where the Basin's loss resembles commodity deforestation: the cocoa and oil-palm frontiers of Cameroon and CAR, the timber trade and mineral supply chains (Kuepper et al. 2025, pp. 128-129).

- ***Consumer-country governments*** could enact and enforce mandatory due diligence and traceability, extending to forest impacts in mineral supply chains, with attention to displacement effects. They could pair regulation with financial, technical and law-enforcement support to producer countries, so that compliance is shared rather than shifted.
- ***Companies and financiers***, international and domestic alike, could implement deforestation- and conversion-free policies with traceability, monitoring, grievance mechanisms and cut-off dates, and apply the mitigation hierarchy with avoidance first. They could also support producer groups so that compliance costs do not fall on smallholders.
- ***For timber***, European measures alone will not close the market for illegal wood as exports shift to markets with weaker requirements (Section 5.3). Engagement with Asian importing and processing countries is needed, as is recognition that well-managed concessions retain most of their carbon (Sagang et al. 2026), so that market measures reward legal producers rather than penalise the sector as a whole.

Civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities ▸

- ***Monitoring and accountability.*** Independent forest monitoring, documentation of rights violations, deforestation alerts, and public scrutiny of permits, finance and supply chains can hold governments, companies and donors alike to their commitments.
- ***Participation and stewardship***. Communities and their organisations are rights-holders, not only beneficiaries. Their participation in land-use planning, FPIC processes and benefit-sharing design, and their management of community forests and enterprises, is how many of the measures above reach the ground.

7.2 Priorities to 2030

The Congo Basin's comparative advantage does not lie only in the quantity of forest still standing, but in the opportunity to avoid repeating the development pathways observed elsewhere in the tropics. The transport projects, the mineral investments and the large conservation landscapes now taking shape, including the Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor, are an opportunity to demonstrate that economic development, forest conservation and community rights can advance together. Whether that opportunity is realised will depend on whether Indigenous Peoples and local communities are recognised not as stakeholders to be consulted but as rights-holders, partners and co-investors in the future of the Basin's forests (CBD 2022). Five priorities follow from the evidence.

1. **Secure the DRC, the Basin's centre of gravity.** Promote partnerships anchored in verified results, scalable payments for environmental services, land-use reform, and interventions that shift the economics of charcoal production and agricultural expansion. To ensure lasting impact, these efforts should be underpinned by stronger land and forest governance, secure rights for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, integrated and participatory land-use planning, and enhanced cross-sectoral coordination. Together, these foundations can align public policies and investment decisions with sustainable development objectives, establish clear safeguards for high-integrity forests and other critical ecosystems, prevent the emergence of new forest frontiers, and ensure that finance reaches the landscapes and rights-holders responsible for sustaining forest and community outcomes.
2. **Prevent the next frontiers from consolidating.** Concentrate prevention in Cameroon and CAR: deforestation monitoring that triggers a response on the ground, support to farmers, and supply-chain measures, where timely action can still avoid a transition to permanent, commodity-driven conversion. The same supply-chain logic applies to timber before demand shifts lock in unsustainable logging: governments may wish to consider enforcement of existing forestry legislation, concession reviews and traceability systems, while importing and processing markets, including the major Asian ones, are engaged to reduce the incentives for illegal timber flows and forest degradation.
3. **Make durability investable.** Position Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of the Congo to access standing-forest finance, with Indigenous Peoples and local communities receiving a meaningful and transparent share of benefits, through robust and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms.
4. **Set the red lines before investment decisions are locked in.** While mining, oil and infrastructure are not currently the dominant direct drivers of forest loss across the Congo Basin, their expansion risks creating significant future and indirect pressures on forests. To prevent these impacts, governments should use strategic spatial planning to restrict development in critical ecosystems, including peatlands and high-integrity forests, and ensure Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for affected communities. Public and private finance for these sectors should be contingent on robust environmental and social safeguards that assess not only direct impacts but also indirect and cumulative impacts at landscape and corridor level. Commercial and financial actors should uphold these requirements consistently throughout investment, financing and project implementation.
5. **Move from monitoring change to managing risk.** Track degradation and fire as core warning signs, connect alerts to funded response systems, and use tools with verified results to direct finance to the landscapes where preventing forest loss delivers the greatest climate and development value.

Annex A.
Data and methods

The paper uses three datasets.

Tree-cover loss is reported at the 30% canopy-density threshold throughout. Gross emissions are from the Harris et al. 2021 flux model on loss pixels only and exclude degradation outside loss pixels, peat oxidation, post-loss regrowth and removals. Net flux is the model's gross emissions less gross removals. Driver attribution assigns one dominant driver per 1 km cell (Sims et al. 2025). Five-year averages are 2020-2024 unless stated.

Dataset	Files	Period	Used for
Tree-cover loss, primary-forest loss, drivers and carbon (Hansen et al. 2013; Sims et al. 2025; Harris et al. 2021; Global Forest Watch 2026)	Six country workbooks (COD, CMR, COG, GAB, CAF, GNQ), 30% canopy threshold	2001-2025	Tables 1, 3 and 4; Figures 1 to 4; Sections 2, 4 and 6
JRC Tropical Moist Forest (Vancutsem et al. 2021; JRC 2026, vFebruary2026)	JRC_TMF_ EvolutionChan-ges_1990_2025_vFebrua-ry2026.csv	1990-2025	Section 2 long-term trends; Figure 1B
CAFI-FAO sample-based area estimates (CAFI and FAO 2026)	National summary workbooks for the six countries	2015-2023	Box 1; Section 2 nationally owned estimates

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