

Rights Group Corporate Accountability Lab Sues Hershey and Rainforest Alliance for False Advertising on Chocolate Products

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Washington, D.C., October 27, 2021: Today, Corporate Accountability Lab (CAL) brought suit against chocolate giant The Hershey Company and certifier Rainforest Alliance, Inc. for false advertising relating to certain Hershey’s chocolate products. Hershey is one of the largest chocolate producers in the US and relies on Rainforest Alliance for much of its certification.

The West African cocoa industry is known for a litany of human rights abuses, including extreme poverty, hazardous child labor, and forced labor. Today, there are an [estimated 1.56 children](#) working in the cocoa industry in Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana alone, with [1.48 million children](#) exposed to hazardous labor. Child labor remains endemic twenty years after Hershey and other multinational chocolate companies publicly promised to eradicate child labor in the West African cocoa industry -- by 2005. Today, Hershey’s supply chain continues to rely on child labor and other exploitative labor practices.

“It is unconscionable that chocolate companies like Hershey hide behind misleading certifications, while profiting off of the backs of children and refusing to pay farmers a fair price. Consumers have a right to accurate information about the products they buy,” said Charity Ryerson, Executive Director of Corporate Accountability Lab.

Certification schemes like Rainforest Alliance put their seal, a green frog, on products to mark them as “sustainable” or “responsibly produced.” Yet despite Rainforest Alliance’s claims, certification does little to guarantee sustainability in the cocoa supply chain. Instead, Rainforest Alliance has been complicit in perpetuating the inequity in the cocoa supply chain, with farmers and their families living on poverty wages, even on “certified” farms. Young children work on these “certified” farms, carrying heavy loads of cocoa and using dangerous tools like machetes.

CAL has identified multiple instances of child labor on Rainforest Alliance certified farms in the past year. For example, investigators spoke with a young boy in the middle of a school day who was working on a certified farm near Abengourou, carrying a heavy bag of cocoa. On another certified farm near Aboisso, a small girl was seen carrying cocoa pods. As one cocoa farmer who sells his cocoa to a certified cooperative explained, “They tell us that children are not supposed to work but they are the ones who help me feed the family. Children work in the plantations because the cooperatives and companies treat us so badly that we need to make children work on the plantations.”

“This lawsuit challenges Hershey and Rainforest Alliance to admit to consumers that their cheap products rely on cocoa farmers’ poverty, child labor, and other exploitative labor practices and to change their purchasing and certifying habits and treat farmers with dignity,” said Allie Brudney, Staff Attorney at Corporate Accountability Lab.

The suit was brought under the Consumer Protection Procedures Act (CPPA), a Washington, D.C. consumer protection statute that allows public interest non-profit organizations to bring claims on behalf of consumers and the general public. This is the first suit to be brought against a certification scheme under the statute. CAL is represented in this case by Richmond Law & Policy.