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## Tree Saving Plan Has Credibility Questions

By Margaret Newkirk

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This March, Gov. Sonny Perdue traveled to a tree farm near Macon to endorse a new environmental program in the state.

Called Keeping Forests in Forests, the program plans to offer 700,000 Georgia electric co-op members — about half of them in metro Atlanta — a chance to offset their “carbon footprints” for an extra \$5 to \$25 on their power bills each month.

The program is a venture of Power4Georgians, a coalition of co-ops planning to build a new — and carbon emitting — coal plant in the state.

The Keeping Forests money will pay timber owners not to cut down carbon-eating trees. Perdue called the program an “environmentally responsible” effort to “ensure that our robust forests stay intact, which will greatly benefit the state’s environment by capturing and storing atmospheric carbon.”

Environmental groups like the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy have a different take. They say Keeping Forests is less a credible carbon offset program than a way to separate dewy-eyed do-gooders from their money.

So which is it?

A little of both.

The program could provide incentives for forest owners, but its consumers may not be getting what they think they are getting. The Keeping Forests program doesn’t meet most standards for credible carbon offsets.

Spokesman Dean Alford said the program is the first of its kind in Georgia and uniquely suited to Georgia in ways that national offset standards are not. And he said the program will develop over time.

“This is really in the early stages,” he said.

The question of offset credibility is one consumers need to learn how to answer, given what’s going on now in Washington.

If Congress enacts caps on how much carbon industries can emit, carbon offset marketers will pour out of the woodwork.

Some programs will be legitimate. Some will not.

Today’s carbon market is voluntary. It’s been described as a Wild West rife with carbon offset schemes backed by dubious claims.

It is being gradually but incompletely reined in by new market standards which some developers follow rigorously and others — like the Keeping Forests group — do not.

Because of that, Keeping Forests' customers will get less bang for their offset buck than participants in stricter programs.

Like Georgia co-op customers, those of California's Pacific Gas & Electric can pay an additional \$5 or more per month to offset their carbon footprint. Their money goes to preserve a 25,000-acre stand of redwood forest for a century.

A \$5 to \$25 payment to Keeping Forests, by comparison, will preserve twice as much woodland — about 50,000 acres of loblolly pine south of Columbus — but for only three years.

The time frame doesn't even meet Georgia's relatively modest carbon forestry protocols, which call for projects that lock up carbon for at least 15 years.

### **What's legitimate?**

In a report last summer, the U.S. General Accounting Office said more than 600 organizations developed, marketed or sold 10 million-plus carbon offsets in 2007. An offset represents either a ton of carbon gas kept out of the air or a ton of carbon gas taken out of the air. Forests do the latter.

The problem is evaluating what's a legitimate carbon offset.

"Participants in the offset market face challenges ensuring the credibility of offsets," the GAO report said.

The markets have at least three, very different standards for establishing a carbon credit's validity, and marketers can follow any one or none of them.

The only real oversight is the market itself, which is so far rewarding programs that meet the strictest and costliest standards. Offsets from projects that meet the strict Climate Action Reserve standards command prices six to 10 times higher than those from projects

verified by the more lenient Chicago Climate Exchange.

Three criteria are considered key in deciding whether a carbon offset is real.

The first is "additionality." The offset has to come from projects that do something new, that "create a new pathway to tie up the carbon I put in the environment by driving my car or flying in an airplane," said SACE Executive Director Stephen Smith.

Second, the offset project is not supposed to just push carbon somewhere else: A landowner who preserves one acre of trees shouldn't be cutting down twice as many next door to make up for it.

Third, projects are supposed to be permanent. Carbon taken out of the air needs to stay out, if not forever, then as long as possible.

### **Plenty of criticism**

Critics of the Keeping Forests program say it has problems on a number of levels.

SACE's Smith said he isn't convinced the program is saving trees that weren't going to stay standing anyway, given the soft state of both the timber market and real estate development.

"If I am a well-meaning citizen and I want to reduce my carbon footprint, what is implicit in that transaction is that I want the person I'm buying from to have done something in the world that would not have happened anyway," Smith said.

The Keeping Forest landowners, he said, are "basically getting paid more for something that was already going on."

But Keeping Forests officials say that assessment ignores Georgia's fluid land use history. Forests have come and gone and are in danger of disappearing again, as pulp and paper profits wane.

State forester Nathan McClure backs that up in part.

The toughest carbon standards require landowners to prove trees are about to be razed. But those standards were created in California, McClure said, where a generally strict environmental climate makes it safer to assume that a tree farm today will remain a tree farm tomorrow.

That's not true here.

"In the South, our land use changes pretty often," he said. "We're a little more into private property rights here."

But McClure said the Keeping Forests project is not even following Georgia protocols for carbon forestry projects, including the requirement that offset projects store carbon for a long time.

Forests that landowners agree to keep for three years can be razed and burned in the fourth, releasing the carbon the owners were paid to store back into the air.

The three-year time frame for the Keeping Forests project is not only inadequate but unheard of, say a host of experts, including standard developer Climate Action Reserve, two carbon project development experts, a university carbon market expert, a carbon offset broker and a company that accredits carbon programs.

"That's just ridiculous," Robert Hrubec, of Scientific Certification Services, said of the three-year requirement.

The strictest standards require 100 years, according to carbon offset experts. More modest ones require at least 15 or 20 years.

Earl Barr, a forester and member of the state Natural Resources board whose firm is managing the Keeping Forests project, said the intention is to sign up landowners for longer terms later. Barr said a three-year contract was

the best they could get now, given the changing carbon markets.

"We can only look so far down this road," he said. "We think it's a good first step."

That may be, said Laurie Wayburn, co-founder of the Pacific Forest Trust, which is working on a carbon forestry project with Emory University.

Keeping Forests may be a positive step, Wayburn said, part of an "enormous place for good things to happen on the landscape."

But with its three-year tenure, it's not a real carbon offset program, she said.