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Making a real difference with forests: New rules would bolster California's carbon market

By Laurie Wayburn

The California Air Resources Board is set to further California's position as a climate leader on Oct. 25, when the board will vote on recommendations to endorse the California Climate Action Registry's forest protocols. The board's endorsement of these rules would create a foundation for the state to use forest conservation and restoration as one of the tools to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in keeping with California's landmark climate law, AB32.

Most people realize we must significantly reduce carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere to successfully address climate change. Similarly, most people realize reducing emissions from fossil fuels is a first step, as these emissions are the source of more than 50 percent of the excess carbon dioxide in our atmosphere today.

Forest loss and depletion accounts for the other 40 to 50 percent of excess atmospheric carbon dioxide. Though forests store carbon dioxide as carbon when they grow, they release it as carbon dioxide when they are disturbed, such as happens when forestlands are converted into sprawling developments. In order for us to restore our climate, carbon-dioxide emissions from forests must be addressed with the same urgency and rigor as is being done with fossil fuels. California is preparing to take just this action.

California has some of the most productive forests in the world – forests that yield sustainable wood products, clean water, abundant wildlife and more. California also has the opportunity to restore some of the largest, most stable forest carbon banks in the world. Originally, California was almost half forested. Over time, however, California has lost more than one-third of its forests to development. With the state air board's leadership, we can start down the path to restoring our state's grand forests and livable climate.

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The forest protocols were developed over four years through a public process and expert review. They are a remarkable accomplishment in two ways. First, they've established the first comprehensive set of scientifically rigorous standards to reduce forest emissions and increase net storage (sequestration) of carbon dioxide consistent with the global norms established under the Kyoto Protocol. Second, their establishment has created a "first place" positioning for California's forests in the growing global carbon market, a market that is estimated to exceed \$40 billion in revenue this year.

The protocols explicitly include sustainable forestry as a key tool to restore and maintain forest carbon stocks. The first project registered – now being certified – is a forest management project. The end result of this project will be not only greatly increased carbon stores, but also a long-term supply of sustainably harvested wood products. Managing this forest for its long-term climate benefits also ensures jobs producing wood products as well as in forest restoration.

The global carbon market has flourished since the Kyoto agreement came into force in 2005 and international norms for carbon-dioxide emissions reductions projects were formulated. Under Kyoto, carbon emissions reductions projects in all sectors (energy, transportation, forests, etc.) can be traded to help meet mandatory targets if they meet certain clear principles. The emissions reductions must be permanent, making a lasting difference. They must provide additional reductions compared to what would otherwise happen. They must create benefits that help sustain natural systems and rural economies.

California's registry program directly fulfills these principles, tying California's actions into global ones. When the Air Resources Board endorses the registry program protocols, an emerging and growing market will have the certainty it needs to grow and thrive. Even at this early stage, demand is growing for California forest emissions reductions from businesses as varied as consumer products companies, public utilities and carbon investment funds. Individuals are also setting an example with their personal actions. Leaders such as California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and state Assembly Leader Fabian Núñez have used forest-based emissions reductions from registered projects to reduce their personal carbon footprints.

The California Air Resources Board has a tremendous opportunity to continue that leadership, make a real difference and keep California leading the carbon market by adopting these proposed protocols as the basis for voluntary early actions. It needs to take such action now, when it makes good sense - for our climate, our forests and our prosperity.

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