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Program Lets Forests Grow Longer to Combat Global Warming in California

July 17, 2006 – Don Thompson - AP

SACRAMENTO (AP) — Californians could soon invest in trees to offset the greenhouse gases they pump into the air when they heat their homes or drive to work.

The non-profit California Climate Action Registry was set up by the state six years ago to encourage corporations and government agencies to track, and ultimately reduce, their emissions. The Forest Protocols program will allow environmentally minded citizens to pay to preserve enough trees to offset their personal carbon emissions.

The registry has calculated how much the timber industry loses by allowing trees to grow longer and bigger — past the time they're normally harvested. The industry would then be compensated by other companies that buy carbon credits — or shares of the trees — to offset their carbon emissions.

Scientists blame emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases for helping cause global warming, which researchers predict will lead to stronger storms, more severe droughts and bigger wildfires.

The Pacific Forest Trust manages the five parcels of timberland owned by the Fred M. van Eck Forest Foundation, and they jointly registered the 2,100-acre property with the state. Negotiations are underway to set the prices for its carbon credits.

For instance, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. in January asked the California Public Utilities Commission to let it start a program next year where customers could choose to pay about 3% more on each monthly bill, with the money earmarked to preserve trees in a registered forest.

The utility pumps about 5.3 tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year to supply the electricity and natural gas used by a typical household. If the homeowner opted to pay about \$4.31 each month to be invested in forests, the trees would store an equivalent amount of carbon.

“It would cost them about \$4.31 a month to become climate neutral,” said Wendy Pulling, PG&E’s director of environmental policy.

PG&E is the first utility in the nation seeking such a program for its five million electric and 4.2 million natural gas customers, Pulling said. The company serves about 14 million people in northern and central California.

If the utilities commission approves the plan later this year, PG&E projects that about 5% of its customers would participate, generating about \$20 million annually. That would support a number of trees equal to taking 350,000 cars off the road, Pulling said.

The money would be invested in forests like the van Eck property in Humboldt County, which is the first to start sending carbon storage information to the state registry.

The Conservation Fund, Nature Conservancy and California Coastal Conservancy are working on a similar program for the 23,000-acre Garcia River Forest in southwest Mendocino County, and Collins Pine Co. is considering a plan for its forests, said Diane Wittenberg, president of the state’s climate registry.

Laurie Wayburn, president of Pacific Forest Trust, said plans are to cut about 2.5% of the forest on the Humboldt County properties each year, but that’s less than the annual growth rate.

“You’re taking less than you’re growing, and most commercial managers take what they grow,” Wayburn said. “So it’s growing bigger, older trees than what would be done in typical commercial (timber) production.”

The older, larger trees also have greater market value once they are cut, Wayburn said.

“It’s not solely for the goodness of the cause, though the landowner believes in that too,” Wayburn said. “There’s a financial benefit as well.”

Pacific Forest Trust has a conservation easement on the van Eck forests, meaning the property must always be used for timber even as neighboring land is being cleared for homes. The trust estimates that California loses about 60,000 acres of forest to development annually; the lost trees equal putting 2.5 million more cars on the road.