



June 25, 2008

Preserve Trees, Make Money, Save the Planet

By Kelly Atherton

Last week, I wrote about the global market for trading carbon-burning rights. This week, I'll focus on forest carbon trading.

The lumber industry used to be an important industry on the North Coast. It still is, but it's not what it used to be.

However, forest landowners are getting into the carbon-trading business. And it's becoming increasingly important for California.

Carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is absorbed by trees, plants and crops through photosynthesis and is stored as carbon in tree trunks, branches, foliage, roots and soil. Carbon "sinks" are forests, crop-lands and grazing lands. Farming and timber-cutting cause the carbon dioxide to be released back into the atmosphere.

The federal government owns a big portion of Del Norte County, a large chunk of which is forest. However, the federal government does not trade carbon.

A report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service determined that trading carbon emissions from trees can help offset the greenhouse gases.

"Forest carbon projects offer a practical and credible low-cost option to mitigate CO2 emissions," the report states.

Trees in particular seem to be an obvious choice. Trees are essential to our ecosystem and livelihood. There is a lot of money to be made from something that is unlikely to run out (like oil or coal). More trees can take in more carbon dioxide.

"Due to the inherent ecosystem services provided by forests' carbon sinks, forests have a role to play in climate change policy and the development of the global carbon markets," the report states.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, agriculture and forestry contributes 10-30 percent of greenhouse gases emissions caused by humans. Sequestering carbon in trees and soil can offset 15-20 percent of carbon dioxide emissions.

Forestry carbon credits are traded on the Chicago Climate Exchange. A benefit of being a member of the CCX is that if a company cannot reduce its own emissions, it can purchase credits from those who make extra emissions cuts or are involved with forest conservation and urban tree planting projects.

In Humboldt County, 60,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions on 2,100 acres of forest owned by the Fred M. van Eck Forest Foundation was sold to Natsource Asset Management. The land is sustainably managed by the Pacific Forest Trust to permanently reduce more than 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions over the next 100 years.

By buying carbon credits to offset their own emissions, businesses are helping to retain California's forests and contributing to a growing carbon market that grew to \$64 billion in 2007.

"Carbon emissions reductions registered and certified by the (California Climate Action Registry) can be sold to businesses and other entities seeking to offset their own emissions,

thus generating a new source of sustainable forest revenue," the USDA Forest Service report states.

In addition, the Conservation Fund, Nature Conservancy, and California Coastal Conservancy are working on a similar project for the 23,000-acre Garcia River Forest in Mendocino County.

In 2012, California's cap and trade system to reduce emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 will begin. Right now, carbon trading is voluntary, but those who emit greenhouse gases will soon have will to cut down and comply with the state emissions goals.

Now, if only the U.S. government would get on board.