

December 8, 2009

---

## Forests a Part of Climate Fix

By D. Andrew Pitz

---

World leaders are convening in Copenhagen to discuss climate change this week, and a Senate committee recently heard testimony from economists on how federal climate legislation might affect jobs and the economy. The stakes for Pennsylvania in this debate are high.

Moving states with a history of heavy industry toward a new "green" economy is imperative. But reducing our dependence on fossil fuels is only one part of the story.

Forest loss and degradation cause the release of the carbon stored in wood in the form of carbon dioxide. This process accounts for more than one-fifth of the world's emissions of carbon dioxide, making it the second-greatest source of global CO2 emissions, following fossil fuels.

In recent years, tropical deforestation in places such as Brazil and Indonesia has been a major source of CO2 emissions. But the loss of forest land in the United States has contributed significantly as well.

Offsetting greenhouse gas emissions by protecting healthy, functioning forests is one of the most cost-effective ways we can stabilize the Earth's climate. That is why the climate bill passed earlier this year by the House includes billions of dollars to protect threatened forests overseas.

Nearly everyone agrees that's a good idea. But, surprisingly, the House bill failed to include strong provisions to protect forests here in the United States.

In Pennsylvania, a state whose rich forest heritage is reflected in its very name - which means Penn's Woods - that's a problem and a lost opportunity. Pennsylvania has more than 17 million acres of some of the most productive forests in the world.

They play an invaluable role in capturing and storing greenhouse gas emissions that would otherwise contribute to warming the atmosphere. And yet the state has been losing forests to sprawling development at an accelerating pace.

Protecting Pennsylvania's forests isn't just good for the climate; it's good for local economies, too. Many rural communities rely on forests for their livelihoods. In some counties, more than 50 percent of the jobs are tied to forests.

Voluntary but binding agreements known as conservation easements are a proven, cost-effective way to protect forest land. They are a key tool for keeping our forests under private ownership, in production, on local tax rolls, and reducing CO2 emissions.

However, conservation easement programs don't have the support they need. Fortunately, U.S. Sens. Debbie Stabenow (D., Mich.) and Max Baucus (D., Mont.) have introduced climate legislation that would protect working forest land by dedicating a portion of the federal revenue generated by any climate-change legislation to conservation easements for forests here at home. This would help build and sustain a truly green economy as well as stabilize our climate.

Stabenow and Baucus' proposal needs support from their colleagues to prevail, and Pennsylvania Sens. Bob Casey and Arlen Specter will play a major role in shaping any climate-change bill. They should remember Pennsylvania's forests and the people who depend on them.

*D. Andrew Pitz is the Natural Lands Trust's vice president for policy and planning.*