

Brazil floating developing-world forest plan

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

As Brazil prepared this month to unveil a proposal for conserving developing-world forests, green advocates wasted no time jousting over the outlines of the plan.

Brazil's Environment Ministry refused to comment on the proposal before presenting it at the 12th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-12), slated for Nairobi, Kenya from Nov. 6-17, other than to provide a barebones press release. But a PowerPoint summary obtained by EcoAméricas shows the proposal calls on developed countries to donate money voluntarily to a UN-managed fund. The money would be paid to developing nations that slow deforestation, thus cutting carbon emissions.

According to the PowerPoint summary, satellite photos would be used to determine the pace of forest-clearing, and developing nations would receive funds based on the degree to which they bring their deforestation rate below a baseline level, called a reference rate. How much a country receives would be determined according to a calculation involving the size of the deforestation reduction and the carbon-storage characteristics of the forestland. Increases in the deforestation rate would be tallied as well, prompting a corresponding reduction in any payments for reductions made in the future.

Immediate debate

Though details of the proposal were scarce in the lead-up to this month's COP-12 meeting, the plan's outlines prompted debate on a variety of questions—a prime one being whether developed countries would devote meaningful support and resources to such a plan. Adriana Ramos, public policy coordinator at the Socio-Environmental Institute, a Brazilian environmental group, believes developed countries would step forward in order to further their own climate-change agendas.

"Amazon deforestation accounts for 65% of Brazil's total carbon emissions, with fossil fuels accounting for close to 35%," Ramos says. "Developed countries understand that if they don't provide countries like Brazil with financial incentives to curb deforestation-based carbon emissions, they will be working against their own efforts, under Kyoto, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and thus global warming."

Mauro Armelin, a climate-change expert for the World Wildlife Fund in Brazil, agrees. He says developed nations already have demonstrated ample interest by contributing to the PPG7, a US\$340 million initiative under which Brazil and European nations have collaborated to conserve Brazilian rainforests.

Others, however, argue that developed

nations would be reluctant to contribute given the disappointing results of the PPG7—and would have little economic incentive to change their minds. And countries subject to the terms of the Kyoto Protocol, they point out, would not under current rules receive greenhouse-gas-reduction credits for donations they pay into a developing-world forest-protection fund. These countries already can and do get credit for funding other types of emissions-reduction projects in developing nations under the protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).

Elliot Diringer, director of international strategies at the U.S.-based Pew Center on Global Climate Change, says that if forest-protection efforts were to qualify for greenhouse gas reduction credits under a future phase of the Kyoto agreement, developed-world businesses in particular would be eager to invest.

Market approach urged

"The Achilles heel of developed countries donating funds to developing countries that reduce deforestation is that developed countries are unlikely to commit enough [money] to drive this approach, money that must come out of congressionally approved budgets," Diringer says. "You're likely to generate far larger flows of private capital through a market approach whereby developing countries that reduced deforestation would get credits, which they could sell to private-sector firms in developed countries to help them meet their future emission-reduction targets."

In making the case for its proposal, Brazil can point to some apparent signs of progress in the fight to slow deforestation. The government estimates Amazon land clearing declined by 30% during the government's latest 12-month monitoring period. According to the new figures, the Brazilian Amazon in the 12 months ending July 31 lost an estimated 5,057 square miles (13,100 sq kms) of forest—an area slightly larger than the U.S. state of Connecticut. That was 30% less than the 7,297 square miles (18,900 sq kms) cleared over the same span in 2004-5. It is the second consecutive yearly drop and the third largest since 1988, when the government began measuring deforestation rates.

Environment Minister Marina Silva attributes the decline to a US\$188 million (R\$ 394 million) three-year program launched in 2004 to establish land-use controls, promote sustainable development and strengthen monitoring and enforcement. Others say the lower rate was due at least in part to a dip in soy and beef prices that effectively reduced the economic incentive to clear land for crops and livestock.

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