

Forests and Climate Change Policy

Forests cover one third of the land area of the United States and, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, currently offset ten percent of the United States' greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through the uptake of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), the release of oxygen and the storage of carbon. This is equivalent to the GHGs emitted by 235 million cars annually. While forest cover in the U.S. remains stable, many alternative land uses, such as development for housing or conversion to agricultural crops, are more profitable ventures for forest landowners. Regardless of the merits of these alternative uses, the fact remains that forestland generally sequesters much more carbon and has more potential to sequester carbon than competing uses.

Just as trees store carbon, so, too, do manufactured wood products. Wood products such as furniture, posts, lumber and wood structures can store carbon for decades. Many carbon offset projects plant trees as a way to increase CO₂ uptake and offset CO₂ emissions. This same offset concept can be applied to managed forests by accounting for the carbon stored long-term in wood products and CO₂ absorption by trees planted after harvest. Carbon offset credits can add value to forestland helping to keep forests forested rather than converted. Not only would this help offset emissions, it would have other benefits, such as wildlife habitat and recreation.

Wood is a renewable resource that is naturally occurring and abundant in many areas of the United States. As a result, the "carbon footprint" of wood products is significantly less than that of similar non-renewable products. Building materials such as cement, steel and iron, generally require 250% more energy to produce than wood products.

Climate change also affects the ability of forests to contribute to the health of our planet. Insects and disease have historically been held in check by cold winters and resilient forests. Current warming trends and drought have contributed to an increase in these infestations. This is particularly true on our federal forests where active management has been curtailed in recent years. Insect infested or disease ridden trees release CO₂ as they decay. Active forest management would control insects and disease, preventing their spread to green, healthy forests, and would remove dead trees, reducing the spread and severity of wildfires as well as preventing the carbon sequestered in those trees from being released as atmospheric CO₂.

A comprehensive approach of using forest management to promote healthy forests that uptake more CO₂ and produce renewable wood products could have a large impact in reducing CO₂ emissions. If forests aren't properly recognized in a climate scheme, forest landowners may have perverse incentives beyond current pressures to convert their land. Moreover, a climate policy which encourages biofuels production while failing to recognize the important role of managed forests and wood products in carbon storage could result in landowners clearing forestland in order to plant favored biofuels crops.

Policy recommendations:

- 1) Recognize the environmental benefits of using wood products instead of more energy-intensive materials by assuring that carbon accounting systems are full life cycle accounting systems.
- 2) Recognize the significant mitigation role of American forests and wood products play in climate change.
- 3) Guard against perverse tax policy incentives which would favor the development or conversion of forested land.

The American Forest Resource Association (AFRC), headquartered in Portland, Oregon, represents nearly 80 forest products businesses and forest landowners in twelve states, primarily in Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho and Montana. Its mission is to create a favorable operating environment for the forest products industry, ensure a reliable timber supply from public and private lands, and promote sustainable management of forests by improving federal laws, regulations, policies and decisions that determine or influence the management of all lands. For information, call 503-222-9505

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