
Thailand: United States' carbon sink plantation proposal rejected

Under pressure from Thai civil society groups, the Thai government rejected a "forest conservation" proposal by the United States (US) that would establish tree plantations to meet the US targets for reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions in return for reducing debt owed by Thailand to the US.

The US proposal would transfer US\$12.6 million (Bt550 million) comprising repayment of Thailand's debt into a "Tropical Forest Conservation Fund" (TFCF) over a period of 28 years. In return, the TFCF would establish tree plantations in Thailand to absorb CO₂ and allow the US to obtain "emission credits" for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Thailand's local community groups, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and academics pressured the government to reject the proposal stating that the risks involved for local communities and forests in Thailand were not worth the money Thailand would gain in debt reduction.

On 1 March 2002, after concluding a two-hour meeting among five government ministries about the proposal, the Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai said that the government decided not to accept the proposal because the science and agricultural ministries, which dealt with the examination of the draft proposal, felt that the US had not responded to Thailand's main concerns.

Without giving details, Mr Surakiart said these concerns involved questions of access to forests and "carbon credits". The minister added that negotiations between the two governments would continue and if the US government accepted Thailand's position, the agreement might be signed next year.

"But our stance will not change. That is, we will not trade off our forest resources and 'carbon credit' for debt reduction," he added.

The government wanted the agreement to be delinked from "carbon credits" under the Kyoto Protocol (which Thailand has not yet ratified). Without this delinkage, Thailand in future may not receive help from industrial countries in the reduction of greenhouse gases.

The Kyoto Protocol requires industrialised countries to reduce emissions of "greenhouse gases" such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. However, those countries can get carbon credits --permits to pollute - if they spend money to plant trees as "carbon sinks" in developing countries to "absorb" some of the CO₂.

The amount of CO₂ consumed by these sinks would then be subtracted from the amount of CO₂ emitted by these rich countries. However, questions remain over the effectiveness of carbon sinks since there is no reliable method of calculating the amount of CO₂ removed from the atmosphere by sinks, or even of calculating the CO₂ emissions likely to occur as a result of establishing tree plantations as sinks.

Decharat Sukkumnoed of the Thai environmental group Sustainable Energy Network said: "I believe

Washington would keep trying to urge Thailand to establish the fund because they could claim carbon credits from such a programme. The Thai government should make it clear that we would not let industrialised countries claim credits over reforestation projects in our country."

Saneh Chamarik, chairperson of Thailand's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), said: "The government should follow the Constitution by allowing the public, independent bodies and academics as well as people's organisations to participate in the decision-making process on the agreement.

"The government should not risk our biological resources in exchange for a cut in our debt. It's time to show that Thailand will no longer surrender to unfair agreements that clearly serve US interests."

Another concern is that the US "debt for forest" proposal would also provide access for US corporations and researchers to Thailand's biological diversity.

Jakkrit Kuanpoth, director of the NHRC's Research and Rule of Law Bureau, said the details of the proposal were similar to the US's own 1998 Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFC Act).

"If we agree to the proposal then this means that the Thai government accepts that the US law can be enforced on Thai territory and any national law and regulations that violates the US law cannot be implemented," he said.

According to Jakkrit, the 1998 TFC Act establishes the US's policy of supporting and seeking protection for tropical forests around the world.

Jakkrit said the policy, however, was based on the US's concerns about how it could commercially benefit from the diversity of biological resources in tropical forest areas that can be developed into pharmaceutical and other products.

Under the TFCF, Thailand would not be able to enforce its laws on biodiversity, protection of natural resources and intellectual property but conform to US laws as per the original proposal.

"It is obvious that the real goal of the US in the proposal is to use Thai biological resources to serve its own pharmaceutical and agricultural industry as well as to collect credit in reducing greenhouse gases [by setting up tree plantations under the Fund]," he said.

Srisuwan Kuankachorn of the Bangkok-based environmental group, Project for Ecological Recovery, states that the TFCF is an example of how industrialised governments continue to try and to buy their way out of solving the problems of climate change rather than taking concrete steps to reduce their emissions. "The project follows the pattern of neoclassical economic development that has caused the environmental problems such as global warming in the first place," he said.

Over the past several years, industrialised countries particularly the US have attempted to avoid making cuts in their greenhouse gas emissions as required by the Kyoto Protocol by proposing projects similar to the TFCF. Complaining that it would affect their economies, the governments of these nations --in particular the US, Canada, Australia and Japan-- are unwilling to take effective action in their own countries, and are effectively seeking to transfer the burden of solving the problems of climate change to developing countries.

In fact, industrialised countries have already polluted their "share" of the atmosphere. Historically, industrialised countries are responsible for up to 90 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The US alone is responsible for around 25 per cent of annual emissions of greenhouse gases, although it has yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

In an article titled "Democracy or Carbocracy", Larry Lohmann of the Cornerhouse, a research and solidarity organisation based in the United Kingdom, states, "The Kyoto Protocol encourages rich countries who already use more than their share of the world's carbon sinks and stocks to buy still more of them --using cash that has itself been accumulated partly through a history of overexploiting those sinks and stocks."

According to the article, the Kyoto Protocol gives the rich the right to emit extra greenhouse gases in exchange for planting or "maintaining" trees or soils in poor countries or in their own rural areas. Subsequently, local people not only have to give up their rights to future use of the land but these projects imply that a country also must relinquish the option of using the plantation areas in its own "CO2 budgets" when, as is likely, the Kyoto Protocol is expandable to include developing countries.

The TFCF and other similar "carbon credit" programmes to establish tree plantations as carbon sinks would not only damage local livelihoods but also sanction fossil-fuel related pollution elsewhere, both at mining and oil-drilling sites and around energy generating plants, with disproportionate effects on the poor around the world.

However, these attempts by industrialised countries to establish "carbon sinks" and avoid reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions are not going unopposed by local community groups in developing countries. In Thailand, the Assembly of the Poor, a country-wide coalition of farmers and local community organisations, submitted an open letter to the Prime Minister's Office demanding that the Thai government act cautiously over TFCF and other similar projects. The letter stated said that it was not worth exchanging the country's bioresources for a small amount of money.

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