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San Francisco, May 2000

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations, wish to express extreme concern about the role envisaged for tree plantations in helping industrialized countries meet their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Sixth Conference of the Parties, in November 2000 in the Hague, will likely determine the content of the so-called Clean Development Mechanism, which could allow many Northern countries to meet their emissions reductions targets by implementing projects in the South.

Trading carbon sequestered in tree plantations for carbon resulting from burning of fossil fuels cannot justify postponing deep reductions in CO₂ emissions in industrialized countries. First, the trade would perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequalities between rich and poor nations and between rich and poor within particular nations. Second, the trade would increase the area of industrial tree plantations, which are already posing severe social and ecological problems worldwide. Third, the claim of quantifiable “climate neutrality” on which this trade rests has a highly questionable scientific basis and sanctions external political interference in the policymaking of the countries of the South.

For a century and a half industrial societies have been moving carbon from underground reserves of coal and oil into the air. Today about 175 billion more tons of carbon are circulating in the atmosphere in the form of CO₂ than before the industrial revolution, the great bulk having come from the North. At least six billion tons are being added every year. Just over 122 corporations account for 80 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions.

The transfer of carbon from fossil fuels to the atmosphere cannot go on indefinitely. Some 4,000 billion tonnes of carbon in fossil fuels are still under the earth’s surface — more than ten times the amount of carbon stored in forests. According to current scientific consensus, adding as little as few hundred billion tons of this to the air would result in climate change unprecedented in human history, bringing extreme storms, droughts and floods, disrupting agriculture, increasing pest infestations, drowning islands and coastlines and creating millions of “climate refugees”.

Climate change will affect the poor most severely. When Hurricane Mitch ravaged Central America it generated hundreds of thousands of environmental refugees. Many small island states may eventually disappear under the sea. In the US it is the poor who are most affected by pollution from oil companies, power utilities and automobiles. Climate change will also severely affect the forests and agriculture that are the sole means for livelihood for millions of people.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, under which industrialized countries pledge to reduce emissions by 2010 by an average of 5.2 per cent below 1990 levels, does not go remotely far enough to stave off these dangers. Even if the Protocol were ratified and fully implemented, it is estimated, it would not be able to moderate an expected warming

trend of 1.4o C. by 2050 by more than around 0.05o C.

Yet instead of strengthening the Protocol in ways that would reduce the use of fossil fuels, some governments are advocating the creation of plantations-based carbon sinks and stores in order to justify lesser reductions in fossil fuel use. Under the Clean Development Mechanism, such projects could be created in the South to “compensate” for industrial emissions in the North.

We are in no doubt about the role of forest conservation in maintaining a livable climate. We are strongly in favor of maintaining and restoring diverse forest ecosystems under local control. We also support the equitable distribution of wealth and common property North and South. But measures to maintain carbon reservoirs both below and above ground must be carefully distinguished from the carbon-trading plantation schemes now being mooted under the Kyoto Protocol. These are based on false premises and are likely to be counterproductive. We oppose the inclusion of plantations as “sinks” in the Clean Development Mechanism for four main reasons:

- Using “sinks” to help Northern countries meet their Kyoto Protocol emissions reductions targets cannot promote a livable climate since those targets are themselves insufficient to do so.
- Trading emissions for tree carbon would intensify regressive redistribution of world resources.

Licensing the burning of fossil fuels by financing tree plantations to “absorb” carbon dioxide would expand the ecological and social footprint of the rich, making existing social inequalities worse. Citizens of a Northern country which use (say) 20 times more per capita of the atmosphere for CO₂ dumping than citizens of a Southern country would be entitled, under the rationale of carbon trading, to use 20 times more tree plantation land in order to compensate. This land would be taken disproportionately from poorer people in the South, where real estate is cheaper and tree growth rates faster. In addition, a carbon-trading system would put Southern countries at a disadvantage when they begin making emissions cuts, since the easiest cuts would have already been purchased and credited to Northern countries. It has often been pointed out that the North owes the South an immense “carbon debt” for its historical overuse of global carbon-cycling mechanisms. Far from abiding by the “polluter pays” principle, using trees to “compensate” for emissions would only increase this resource debt.

Such schemes would also sanction and deepen inequalities within both Southern and Northern countries. For example, corporations that buy carbon-dioxide emission rights in the North by sponsoring carbon “offset” plantations in the South would be allowed to go on releasing, along with CO₂, many other pollutants that pose local health risks. Corporations site a disproportionate number of such factories in poor communities of color.

- Large-scale industrial tree plantations are a threat to communities and ecosystems the world over.

Millions of hectares of new plantation land would have to be taken over in any attempt to counteract even a small fraction of industrial emissions. Experience with large-scale tree plantations indicates that such “offset” projects would usurp needed agricultural lands, replace valuable native ecosystems, worsen inequity in land ownership, increase poverty, lead to evictions of local peoples, and undermine local stewardship practices needed for forest conservation. In Chile, Indonesia, the Nordic countries and elsewhere, tree plantations have destroyed natural forests, while in South Africa, Argentina and Uruguay they have replaced other valuable ecosystems such as grasslands. In countries such as Brazil, Thailand and Chile tree plantations are at the root of serious land conflicts among local communities, landowners, corporations and the state. Nearly everywhere they have led

to loss of water resources and biodiversity. Inherent in industrial plantation forestry models and exhaustively documented by the World Rainforest Movement and others over many years, these deleterious effects of plantations would only be accentuated if genetically modified trees were employed.

-Using tree plantation projects to “compensate” for the climatic effects of carbon-dioxide emissions is scientifically incoherent and sanctions external political interference in the social policies of host countries.

A market in “carbon offsets” presupposes a notion of “climate neutrality” or “climate equivalence”. In order for a plantation “offset” project to be tradable for a given amount of industrial emissions, a single determinate number would need to be calculated to represent the amount of carbon sequestered or stored as a result of the project over and above what would have been sequestered or stored in its absence.

Deriving such a number involves quantifying two types of project effect. Both would influence the net amount of carbon sequestered or stored.

One type of effect is physical. Unlike underground oil or coal, carbon stored in live or dead trees can quickly reenter the atmosphere at any time. Fires, whether human-set or not, are unavoidable features of both forests and plantations, and rates of decay difficult to anticipate. As CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere rise, moreover, heightened rates of respiration could turn forests and plantations alike into net sources of CO₂ emissions, while diebacks and fires due to localized climate change are bound to increase. In addition, plantations typically reduce the capacity of soils to store carbon, both inside and (through increased erosion) outside project areas. Vulnerable, dynamic and unpredictable, plantations, unlike underground reserves of oil and coal, are insecure storage places for carbon. These considerations alone indicate that no equivalence between industrial emissions and trees can be established of the type which would be necessary for the establishment of a “carbon offset” plantation market.

The second type of effect is social, and would exert an equally important influence on the amount of carbon sequestered or stored. Carbon “offset” projects could, among other things:

*Displace communities in the immediate neighborhood, which could lead to the project’s destruction or cancellation or forest clearance and CO₂ releases elsewhere.

*Undermine existing technologies or social networks preventing climatically-destabilizing forms of industrial land clearance and loss of local knowledge of sustainable agricultural or forest-conservation practices.

*Reduce investor interest in energy conservation or renewables.

*Displace timber operations to other locations and influence wood and land prices and thus incentives for logging.

*Change consumer demand, landfill legislation and other social factors influencing how quickly plantation products, including paper and furniture, were converted to carbon dioxide.

*Siphon funding away from existing forms of carbon protection.

*Provide incentives to degrade forests or other lands outside project boundaries in order to attract new money for carbon projects.

Such social effects are impossible to quantify. It is not even possible, in fact, to determine a single social outcome for any given project, which would be a prerequisite for both quantification and a “carbon trade”. First, predicting the extent of the social effects of a plantation project would be impossible. These effects, moreover, are not a matter for prediction, but for democratic decision. Many different “atmospheric outcomes” of a single project are possible, depending on what policies are adopted. For example, people evicted by a plantation “offset” project are likely to behave in different ways toward forests in their region depending on their land rights, which in turn depends on national policy. To assign a single number to their behavior would be to prejudge which policy will be in effect. It could even be said implicitly to support that policy. Second, continuous monitoring of the extent of all social effects of a plantation project would be impracticable and vastly uneconomical (involving, among other things, close attention to the actions of thousands of rural people in the vicinity of the project as well as to the psychology of investors in renewables in distant cities). Third, controlling the behavior of all people affected by an “offset” project in such a way that the effect of their actions on atmospheric carbon became precisely calculable over the many decades during which a project’s carbon would have to be sequestered would also be impossible. The attempt to do so, moreover, would be politically unacceptable.

By the same token, it is impossible to compare quantitatively the atmospheric effects of a plantation with “what would have happened without it”. What would have happened without any particular project depends on many variables, some of them influenced by policy choices and political action which economists, biologists, foresters or climate scientists are not entitled to prejudge. Yet without such prejudgments, a carbon “commodity” is impossible.

In sum, the climatic effects of a plantation “offset” project cannot be calculated simply by (say) comparing the amount of carbon stored in local vegetation and soils before and after the project and by monitoring changes in vegetation outside the project site. Deeper issues are involved that cannot be resolved through “learning by doing”.

We, the undersigned NGOs, strongly support national and international efforts to address climate change, especially through energy conservation, consumption reduction, more equitable resource use, and equitable development and sharing of renewable sources of energy. We hold that a widespread trade in tree plantation “offsets”, through the Clean Development Mechanism and other means, would block or undercut these necessary and urgent measures, which constitute a rare opportunity to move on from dominant and failed patterns of development. We urge governments not to include plantations as carbon sinks in the Clean Development Mechanism and to address industrial emissions separately from tree plantations. A livable climate can be assured only by a commitment to tackling the root causes of global warming.

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