

BIG STORY 10 JANUARY 9, 2019 / 7:06 AM / 8 MONTHS AGO

California split over carbon trading plan for tropical forests

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QUITO (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Indigenous leaders from tropical forest nations have urged Californian regulators to reject a proposed international carbon trading scheme, arguing it would violate forest peoples' rights.

The California Air Resources Board (CARB) is due to decide in April whether to adopt the California Tropical Forest Standard (TFS), a controversial plan focused on protecting large forested areas through the use of carbon credits.

At a November meeting in Sacramento, the board heard hours of testimony from more than 80 climate scientists, indigenous representatives and activists, both for and against the proposal. A decision was postponed until this spring.

The TFS would resemble existing carbon market mechanisms, allowing companies to offset their planet-warming emissions by paying to keep forests - which absorb and store carbon - standing abroad rather than reducing emissions at home.

Supporters believe protecting tropical forests is essential to limit climate change, since deforestation and forest degradation account for about 17 percent of emissions worldwide.

But the TFS has many critics, particularly among scientists and indigenous communities familiar with the failings of programs like REDD+, a donor-backed effort

launched by the United Nations to curb emissions from deforestation.

“We think it’s a big lie that the governments say they are going to save the forest,” said Daniel Santi, an indigenous Kichwa leader from Ecuador.

“The real people who have been conserving, protecting and fighting (for forests) have been indigenous people,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at an indigenous assembly outside Puyo, capital of the Amazon province of Pastaza, in December.

Santi said Ecuador’s indigenous communities were already seeing repercussions from the TFS, similar to those experienced with REDD+.

After creating the Pastaza Ecological Area of Sustainable Development in 2017, local officials wrote to CARB in support of the TFS.

The Pastaza reserve covers more than 2.5 million hectares (6.2 million acres) of rainforest - about 90 percent of the province - a perfect size for the TFS, which would concentrate on large-scale forest areas.

Indigenous organizations have denounced the project, saying the seven indigenous nationalities that live in Pastaza were never consulted.

They must now adhere to provincial conservation regulations, which include limitations on hunting and cutting down trees for community use, harming their way of life, said Santi.

Meanwhile, Ecuador’s government continues to promote extraction activities in at least three oil blocks inside the protected area, which have been opposed by most indigenous communities living there.

COMMUNITY HARM

In November, indigenous leaders from Ecuador, Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria traveled

to California to persuade the U.S. state to abandon the TFS.

They said other forest protection mechanisms like REDD+ had divided communities, violated their territorial rights, and failed to gain their consent in advance.

Neither had the schemes kept forests safe from fossil fuel extraction, the main cause of forest degradation and displacement of indigenous communities, the local leaders said.

In a letter, 110 scientists who have studied REDD+ and other carbon offset programs advised CARB not to adopt the standard.

Such programs have curtailed livelihoods with minimal compensation, constrained community access to forest resources, and undermined local governance, the letter said.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, one of CARB's 16 members, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation the testimonies had raised concerns about the impact of the TFS on indigenous communities and whether it could protect both them and forests.

CARB should focus on reducing emissions at home, he noted.

EASIER MONITORING?

But Steve Schwartzman, senior director of tropical forest policy with the Environmental Defense Fund and a strong TFS supporter, dismissed negative comparisons with REDD+.

“All of the criticism I've heard that was specific at all was directed toward standalone REDD projects,” he said.

The California TFS would back much larger conservation programs in tropical forest nations, whether jurisdictional, state-wide or national, he added.

Their bigger size would make it “easier and more accurate” to monitor deforestation and measure emissions, he noted.

The TFS also includes rigorous safeguards for indigenous rights, such as assigning independent auditors and requiring jurisdictions to set up reporting systems, said Schwartzman.

The TFS was created to set a global standard for carbon-offset programs, and if approved, could serve as a model for other states and countries.

Eduardo Garcia, a California Assembly member and CARB board member, has argued California can play a role in reducing emissions in other parts of the globe.

Another letter signed by more than 100 scientists, economists and anthropologists, encouraged the board to “unlock” California’s international potential by approving the TFS.

OIL IMPORTS

Santi, the Ecuadorian indigenous leader, branded carbon trading programs a “deception”, however - especially the TFS proposed by California, which is one of the largest importers of Amazon crude oil.

According to California’s energy commission, the state imports more crude oil from the Amazon than anywhere else, accounting for 38 percent of its imports in 2017. Crude from Ecuador makes up a fifth of California’s oil imports.

“TFS could allow oil refiners, which are purchasing oil from Ecuador to turn around and buy offset credits from the same regions in Ecuador that have been devastated by oil drilling,” said Zoe Cina-Sklar of advocacy group Amazon Watch.

Instead of carbon trading, California should curb Amazon crude imports and take immediate measures to wean itself off fossil fuels, such as freezing new oil and gas permits in the state, she added.

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