
Plantations as sinks: the carbon fraud at its worst

While for the majority of humanity climate change spells disaster, a few corporate-minded people perceive it as a good business opportunity. The way they see it, climate change is about carbon emissions and carbon can be traded as a commodity in the global market. This market – so they say – can be worth billions or even trillions of dollars and they expect it to bring them huge profits. Never mind if this market has any value at all in terms of halting climate change; the only thing that counts is its value as a profit making investment.

The problem is that these people have power and are very influential at both the national and international level, where laws and agreements are tailored to suit their wishes. Such has been the case in the Convention on Climate Change and its related Kyoto Protocol, which caved in to their pressure by accepting the carbon market as one of the “solutions” to climate change. Thus the so-called “Clean Development Mechanism” was approved as a means of “offsetting” CO₂ emissions.

Additionally, governmental support to “free market” approaches have allowed those same actors to set up a voluntary carbon market where people are duped into believing that by paying some money they can be free from the guilt of their CO₂ emissions –for instance, in air traveling. The “carbon neutral” market was thus born.

Both the “official” and “unofficial” carbon markets have included tree plantations as one of the possible mechanisms for “offsetting” emissions.

WRM has produced abundant information on the impacts of tree plantations in general, has produced analyses on why plantations should not be considered as carbon sinks, has detailed the reasons for opposing the carbon market and has explained why “carbon neutrality” is a fraud. All that information is easily available in our web site.

We would now like to focus on only one issue, which is in itself sufficient for the exclusion of tree plantations as carbon sinks: the risk of fire.

Imagine the following situation. A polluting company in the North pays a “carbon neutral” seller that promises to “offset” its emissions by planting trees. Let's assume that the trees are in fact planted and that they do absorb the entire amount of carbon emitted by the polluting company. Six years later, the plantation goes up on fire. The result will be that the burnt plantation will have released the entire amount of carbon that it was supposed to “offset”. Which means that the plantation's only use was to allow the polluting company to avoid investing in what is most necessary from a climate perspective: cutting emissions.

The above is a real situation scenario, because the most common types of plantations –eucalyptus and pines – are naturally prone to fire. Both types of trees are highly flammable in natural stands – fires in fact help them to out-compete other species – and are even more flammable in large-scale fast growth plantations because they create a very dry environment under their canopy, ideal for the spread of fire.

Additionally, the social conditions they create also make them arson targets in many places where local people have been affected by them. Although not a proven fact, some fires in places as distant as Chile and Swaziland, are said to have been initiated by local people displaced or impacted by plantations. Some 10 years ago, in Venezuela, plantation and pulp company Smurfit employees had orders to search local people near its plantations and to confiscate matches and lighters for fear of arson. And the possibility was very real, because most of the locals did in fact wish to set the plantations on fire and expressed it openly.

For both social and environmental reasons, plantations are constantly going up in flames all over the world. Some of the cases that have received more news coverage include plantations – and forests – in Australia, Spain, Portugal, Chile, South Africa, Swaziland. But it is sufficient to do a simple internet search to find many more plantation-related fires in countries with large areas of tree monocultures.

The obvious conclusion in relation to plantations as carbon sinks is that it is very unwise – not to say plain stupid – to use them for storing carbon. Plantations as sinks have only one positive aspect: they portray the carbon market fraud at its worse.