
Vietnam: Carbon sink plantations to avoid emission reductions in Australia

During the intergovernmental negotiations on climate change (COP-6) at the Hague last November, the Australian government sided with the US, Japan and Canada in refusing to negotiate reductions of its own carbon emissions. Five months later, the Australian government announced five projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Predictably enough, the projects, which are funded through the government's International Greenhouse Partnerships (IGP) Programme, are not aimed at reducing Australia's emissions, but are to be carried out in Peru, Fiji, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Launched in May 1998, and working from within the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, the IGP Programme aims "to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through projects overseas" that will in future be considered as carbon off-set projects under the Kyoto protocol.

Announcing the projects, Nick Minchin, the Australian Minister for Industry, Science and Resources, said "Not only will the projects be addressing global climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, they will be helping to develop Australia's expertise in clean, green technologies through sound, commercially viable projects."

One of the IGP Programme projects will establish fast-growing tree plantations in Vietnam. The US\$242,000 project is to be carried out by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) with the Research Centre for Forest Tree Improvement of Vietnam. According to Minchin, CSIRO "will increase the carbon dioxide uptake of planted forests [sic] in Vietnam through the use of genetically improved planting stock."

CSIRO will supply acacia and eucalyptus seeds --the favoured trees of the pulp and paper industry-- and will establish four seedling orchards, each covering five hectares, two in Quang Tri province in central Vietnam and two in Binh Thuan province in the south. Seedlings from these orchards will be planted over a total area of 8,250 hectares on a range of sites in Vietnam.

CSIRO estimates that the plantations will remove "an extra 21,500 tonnes of CO₂" from the atmosphere per year compared to other tree plantations. The calculation is based on a 15 per cent increase in volume growth, which CSIRO expects from using improved tree seeds. Recent research published in the journals "Nature" and "Science", however, indicates that forests are much better than plantations at absorbing carbon dioxide (see WRM bulletin 39). Yet, the publicly available information on the IGP project makes no mention of any attempts to compare the amount of carbon stored in natural forests to that stored in plantations.

CSIRO also anticipates developing predictive models for "other major plantation species", and argues that "such a capability will assist in the successful growth of plantations, enabling higher yields from the forests [sic] planted and greater carbon sequestration in the longer term." Even assuming plantations are useful in absorbing carbon dioxide, the logic is flawed -- higher yield plantations make no difference if the trees are cut after five years to produce short-lived commodities like woodchips, pulp and paper.

Elsewhere in Vietnam, private investors are finding it difficult to find enough land for their tree plantations. For example, the US\$14 million Japanese-funded Quy Nhon Forest Plantation in Binh Dinh province aims to plant 13,000 hectares of acacia and eucalyptus plantations to produce wood chips for export to Japan. So far, in the seven years since the project was licensed, the company has received only around 8,000 hectares of land. "The land problem is increasing the risks for projects in plantations," Hironobu Ohara, the director of the project told the Vietnam Investment Review.

According to a recent article in the Thai newspaper, the Nation, the Vietnamese government stated that any carbon sequestration plantation projects in Vietnam must include support for communities that would be affected by the plantations. No such support is mentioned in the publicly available information on the IGP plantation project in Vietnam.

CSIRO receives 75 per cent of its funding from the Australian government, and is explicit about where its loyalty ultimately lies. In the organisation's own words: "CSIRO's primary functions are to assist Australian industry, contribute to Australia's national objectives and facilitate the application of the results of research."

The message is clear: the Australian government will not negotiate reductions in Australian carbon emissions, but CSIRO will "assist Australian industry" through planting eucalyptus and acacia trees in Vietnam -- supposedly to absorb those emissions.