

California must not fall for marketing scheme that falsely claims to protect tropical forests

By Katie Valenzuela and Leila Salazar-Lopez, Special to CalMatters

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Imagine we were presenting you with an investment opportunity. It would cost a lot, and similar programs have failed miserably.

Human rights violations would very likely occur. There are more viable alternatives available with similar (or lower) costs, but we're asking you to invest anyway because we are certain we could figure out a way to make a failed program work this time.

Would you give us your money?

The proposed [Tropical Forest Standard](#) designed and promoted by Environmental Defense Fund and Earth Innovation Institute is presenting just such a risky investment scenario for the state of California.

At its core, this is a carbon offset program designed to send money from polluters in California to subnational governments in other parts of the world in hopes that such investment will be sufficient to counteract the economic drivers of deforestation.

The cost: continued pollution in our communities and irreparable harm to forest-dwelling communities around the world.

Alarmingly, the [California Air Resources Board is poised to endorse](#) the Tropical Forest Standard at its meeting next week. We don't think it's worth the risk.

This central theory of the Tropical Forest Standard has been proven false time and time again, first with the Kyoto Protocol, then with numerous public and private programs known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, or REDD+.

Norway has invested over \$1 billion into tropical forest programs like the one California is considering, and recently found that results were uncertain and unsatisfactory.

Funneling resources into these programs doesn't work without federal support, which is why Norway and Germany just pulled out of their funding agreements with Brazil because President Bolsonaro's policies are increasing deforestation activities.

These failures have not simply been a matter of wasted money. They come at the cost of pollution in other parts of the world as industries use these credit schemes to "greenwash" their operations.

In many cases, they result in permanent damage to forests and the communities who rely upon them. There have been several documented cases of indigenous communities losing their land rights as government entities and companies seek land to use for crediting, rights that California would be in no place to reinstate.

Simply taking the money back is not a sufficient response, but it is the only response we would have under the Tropical Forest Standard.

What's worse: California's proposed endorsement is explicitly named to inform the work of other governments and industries outside of California, meaning we can't even demand the money back when the standard is used inappropriately.

We would have no authority to do anything at all.

As upset as we are with the deplorable actions of President Bolsonaro in Brazil, imagine how much worse it would be if he were using a tool we created to continue destroying the Amazon.

This doesn't mean that California should do nothing.

We are the fifth largest economy in the world, and have a major appetite for products from tropical forests—from timber to crude oil from the Amazon.

We can make important progress on these solutions if we resolve to commit the resources and policy changes necessary to actually help the tropical forests.

We can start with supply chain research and disclosures to inform consumers when the products they purchase contribute to deforestation, and gradually escalate to procurement policies that shifts our buying power away from those industries and toward sustainable alternatives.

A great model of policy we should pursue was Assembly Bill 572 by Assemblyman Ash Kalra, San Jose Democrat. It would have cost much less than the potential costs of oversight for the Tropical Forest Standard. But that bill recently died in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The California Air Resources Board and Gov. Gavin Newsom should take California's status and responsibility as a global leader seriously and reject the Tropical Forest Standard. They should not participate in a marketing scheme that fails every test for permanent, meaningful change.

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