

California approves controversial tropical forest offsets plan

Mallory Moench Sep. 23, 2019

As tropical rain forests around the world burn, the California Air Resources Board voted 7-4 Thursday evening to approve a controversial carbon-offsetting standard that would let companies buy carbon credits to stop deforestation.

The proposed Tropical Forest Standard would not immediately allow companies participating in California's cap-and-trade program to combat climate change to buy the offsets — that would require further regulatory action.

Rather, it would provide standards for emerging voluntary carbon markets to inform offset programs, create international payment systems for programs that demonstrate reductions and help companies source more sustainably, the air board said.

It's an unprecedented move for a state government. To do nothing while the Amazon burned "would be unforgivable," Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols said Thursday at a public hearing in Sacramento.

"Today we have an opportunity to help change the destructive status quo, providing an alternative that flips the economy that has led to wholesale clearing of tropical forests," Nichols said.

Critics among the dozens who testified at the multi-hour hearing said the standard failed to address the demand for products that drive rainforest clearing, stop pollution by the same corporations on local communities and heed research that showed similar programs had been ineffective.

Deforestation accounts for 11% to 14% of global carbon emissions, more than 10 times California's emissions, air board staff member Barbara Bamberger said in a presentation Thursday. More than 87,000 fires have ignited across Brazil alone this season, far more than a year ago, Bamberger said.

"Many of these fires were ignited specifically to clear land for cattle ranching and crops, reflecting the current economic reality that value of cleared forest is more than intact forests," Nichols said. "That's the economic reality many in these areas deal with as they try to feed their families."

The air board said the standard's principles were endorsed by 34 subnational governments, 18 representatives of indigenous peoples and 17 nonprofit organizations representing millions of people that convened last year. Implementation would be monitored by those same leaders, regional governments, and the air board based on satellite imagery and ground data to ensure progress is being made.

Representatives from the Environmental Defense Fund and Earth Innovation Institute who advocated for the standard quoted a letter by 118 leading scientists encouraging the board to endorse it. The daughter of assassinated indigenous Amazonian activist Chico Mendes, along with representatives from the United Nations Development

Programme, the Brazilian state of Acre and the Yurok tribe in California, said it was a powerful incentive.

But other indigenous leaders from Brazil, Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador and Indonesia urged the board to reject it, saying it would encroach on their sovereignty and violate their internationally guaranteed rights to consultation and prior consent.

Ninawa, a spiritual leader of the Huni Kuin people in the Amazon, called carbon offsets “a form of colonialism” that would “legalize the loss of indigenous people’s sovereignty.”

“The state of California has no right to decide about the life of people they’ve never met and have no idea about the standard,” he said. “You are threatening our very existence.”

He urged the board to instead monitor oil, aviation and logging companies that he said are the biggest polluters and deforesters.

Experts said research shows similar programs rejected by other governments have been ineffective. Members of the European Union's Emissions Trading System, which has never allowed tropical forest carbon offsets, sent a letter to the board in April opposing the standard.

“Prices of carbon are not competitive with profits from forest destroying industries,” Kathleen McAfee, global environmental policy professor at San Francisco State University, said Thursday. “They are subsidized and promoted and protected by the very same governments that are accepting funds for forest conservation.”

Libby Blanchard, scholar at the University of Cambridge Conservation Research Institute, said the standard “would offer big emitters another way to continue business as usual,” adding that California refineries are a major processor of Amazon crude oil.

Another scholar questioned how indigenous communities would address grievances if jurisdictions didn’t comply under the standard.

Katie Valenzuela, policy and political director at California Environmental Justice Alliance, said the state wouldn’t have regulatory power to pull back credits, and companies could still keep polluting. She formerly worked with Assembly member Eduardo Garcia (D-Coachella), who sits on the Air Resources Board, to convene stakeholder meetings and led a delegation to the Amazon last year.

“You are considering a standard that is destined to fail,” Valenzuela said. “This is worse than doing nothing.”

Local activists argued that allowing corporations to buy carbon offsets lets them off the hook for polluting local communities of color, citing Chevron’s oil refineries in Richmond. Others said the air board is ignoring its mandate to protect California’s health by getting involved in foreign policy. The only thing that defenders and opponents of the standard could agree on was the need to protect rainforests.

Chevron did not respond to a request for comment.

Mallory Moench is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: mallory.moench@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@mallorymoench](https://twitter.com/mallorymoench)

