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Climate Talks Near Deal to Save Forests

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

COPENHAGEN — Negotiators have all but completed a sweeping deal that would compensate countries for preserving forests, and in some cases, other natural landscapes like peat soils, swamps and fields that play a crucial role in curbing [climate change](#).

Environmental groups have long advocated such a compensation program because forests are efficient absorbers of carbon dioxide, the primary heat-trapping gas linked to global warming. Rain forest destruction, which releases the carbon dioxide stored in trees, is estimated to account for 20 percent of greenhouse gas emissions globally.

The agreement for the program, if signed as expected, may turn out to be the most significant achievement to come out of the [Copenhagen climate talks](#), providing a system through which countries can be paid for conserving disappearing natural assets based on their contribution to reducing emissions.

A final draft of the agreement for the compensation program, called [Reducing Emissions From Deforestation and Forest Degradation](#), or REDD, is to be given on Wednesday to ministers of the nearly 200 countries represented here to hammer out a framework for a global climate treaty. Negotiators and other participants said that though some details remained to be worked out, all major points of disagreement — how to address the rights of indigenous people living on forest land and what is defined as forest, for example — had been resolved through compromise.

A final agreement on the program may not be announced until the end of the week, when [President Obama](#) and other world leaders arrive — in part because there has been so little progress on other issues at the climate summit meeting, sponsored by the [United Nations](#).

“It is likely to be the most concrete thing that comes out of Copenhagen — and it is a very big thing,” said Fred Krupp, head of the [Environmental Defense Fund](#).

For poorer countries, the payments will provide a much-needed new income stream. For richer nations, the lure of the program is not cash but carbon credits that can be used to cancel out, in part, their industrial emissions under a carbon trading system, like the [cap-and-trade](#) plan currently under consideration by Congress.

Forests “have become a pot of money or a get out of jail free card,” said Peg Putt, a consultant to the [Wilderness Society](#). “Either way, there’s the prospect of financial benefit now, as opposed to just being told, ‘Do the right thing,’ like it was two years ago.”

The new plan represents an important shift from earlier United Nations climate programs, like the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, in which countries committed to curbing their industrial emissions but got no credit for reducing emissions through changes in land use.

The agreement is also being closely watched in Congress, where climate legislation passed the House in June and is currently stalled in the Senate.

Under the cap-and-trade system preferred by Democratic leaders and the Obama administration, companies that cannot meet their greenhouse gas pollution limit could buy extra permits by investing in carbon-reduction programs abroad. Plans to preserve forests under REDD would presumably qualify.

The forest program “offers the opportunities for U.S. companies to reduce emissions at lower cost, which is very important politically,” Mr. Krupp said.

Under the final draft of agreement, other habitats that absorb carbon dioxide — like peat bogs, [which store large amounts of carbon dioxide in their soil](#) — could be eligible for payments. This prospect has environmentalists scrambling to calculate the carbon storage capacity of other resources like swamps and fields, not for the sake of preserving beauty or biodiversity, but for their potential financial benefit.

“Why is everyone thinking about forest and peat land while overlooking oceans, the biggest carbon store on the planet?” said Dan LaFolley, marine vice chairman for the World Commission on Protected Areas of the Swiss-based International [Union for the Conservation of Nature](#). “It would be a travesty if Copenhagen addressed forests but not other carbon stocks.”

The potential for payments has even pitted advocates for some types of forest against advocates for other types.

“Were not sure in Copenhagen there will be a definitive mechanism for monetizing forests, but if there is we think all forests should be included,” Steve Kallick, director of the [Boreal Conservation Pew Environment Group](#), who studies northern forest stocks and noted that by some measures, boreal forests store twice as much carbon dioxide per unit as tropical forests.

Even if the ministers pass the agreement, as it is predicted they will, it will take some time before the money starts flowing. Many details remain to be worked out, including the exact level of emissions reduction the REDD program should aim for and by what date, and what system should be used to measure the carbon storage of various habitats.

Meanwhile, scientists and conservationists have flocked to Copenhagen to make their case.

“We’ve seen the idea of REDD start in forestry, but expand to other land use sectors,” Ms. Putt said.

Cary Fowler of the Global Crop Diversity Trust said he decided to come to Copenhagen when he saw no mention of crop diversity or agriculture in an earlier climate proposal.

“I thought I’d better come,” he said. “This negotiation will help decide what’s on the table — which issues are legitimate and which not.”

While progress was made on the forest program, little else was achieved at the bargaining tables here on Tuesday. A top United Nations official, asked to characterize the state of the talks, said simply, "Terrible."

A new draft of a proposed global accord leaves critical questions unanswered: how deeply nations will cut their greenhouse gas emissions, how much money will flow to help poor nations adapt to global warming and how any environmental program will be monitored and verified.

"There's a great deal yet to do," said Todd Stern, the chief climate change envoy for the United States.

Mr. Stern also said that President Obama would not consider changing the American commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the United States by about 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020.

"It's tied to legislation," he said. "We don't want to promise something we don't have."

Leaders have already abandoned hope of completing a binding international treaty here and say they will continue the work next year. Trying to infuse a sense of urgency, former Vice President [Al Gore](#) pressed the negotiators in an afternoon speech to speed up next year's sessions with an eye toward completing a treaty in July. He also asked Mr. Obama and Senate leaders to set an April deadline for completing a Senate climate and energy bill.

Mr. Obama has been talking with a number of foreign officials in advance of his arrival here on Friday, the last scheduled day of the conference. He has spoken with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany, Ethiopia and Bangladesh since Monday, hoping to find a way to bridge the differences between the developed and developing countries that have divided this effort for years.

Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) will arrive in Copenhagen on Thursday to help provide a final push toward agreement, a State Department official confirmed. She will stay until Mr. Obama departs, the official said.

[Ban Ki-moon](#), secretary general of the United Nations, addressed the delegates Tuesday night as they moved into the final days of negotiations.

"We do not have another year to deliberate," he said. "Nature does not negotiate."

John M. Broder contributed reporting.

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