

From Your Commissioner



Carbon Credits

I have to admit that I have never been a fan of any types of environmental credits. I just see them as a bit of a sham. Someone pays someone else to reduce their level of “whatever,” the company paying the fee gets to do nothing different, but they can claim that they have reduced their output of “whatever.” Who pays for this? Not the company, in reality it is you and me through increased prices. Now, I am willing to admit that in some cases there can be an actual decrease in pollution, but overall shouldn't every company be doing their best to actually reduce their emissions? In the end that is really the only way to make a big difference. Although as long as countries like China continue to increase their levels of pollution aren't we really acting like the little Dutch boy sticking his finger in the holes in the dike?

Carbon sequestration (storing of carbon) in agricultural lands is at least a real way of decreasing carbon, through no-till and other similar practices. However, sequestration in forests is really a huge sham, in my opinion. Until I listened to a presentation at a meeting of the Current Use Board, by Charles Levesque, I really didn't know much about it. About halfway through the presentation, I realized that the program is more likely to increase our carbon output than it is to decrease it. How could that be possible, aren't we decreasing the amount of timber harvested? No, actually we are not.

What we are doing is simply shifting markets. Sequestration does not lessen the demand for forest products. Does anyone think that fewer houses will be built out of wood if you can't buy it from a protected forest? Will fewer people burn cord wood? Will there be less production of furniture made with wood? Of course not, and the net effect of that carbon sequestration is zero at best. In reality the net effect is likely a negative.

How is that possible, you might ask? Well, here is a real-life example, the state's largest lumber mill is in Milan. With about 200,000 acres of North Country Forest land under carbon programs, they no longer have access to the timber coming from that land. So, in order to keep the mill running the logs are being trucked in from remote locations. How much more carbon is being released by burning all that additional diesel fuel? I won't pretend to know, but it has to be substantial.

Why does this program exist at all and who benefits? First of all, it is companies that emit a large amount of carbon. Industries such as airlines love it. They can do nothing to decrease their actual output, but by increasing air fare, they can buy credits and claim to be reducing their carbon footprint. The middleman in this process gets to charge a fee of around 20 to 25% for putting the parties together and finally the landowners who might not even have to change their harvest schedule and could get paid for doing nothing.

In those cases, it might not even result in any less logging. That can happen when a piece of land had been heavily harvested and no further harvesting is planned for decades. That type of program is the least harmful to the forest industry, but it is also the best example of what a sham the program is. In cases where the harvest is actually reduced or stopped, it results in the worst-case scenario for the forest industry and the taxpayers. How are the taxpayers harmed? Municipalities in Coos County receive around 25% of their income from the timber tax. When that is reduced, budgets have to be cut or property tax rates have to be increased.

As P. T. Barnum said there is a sucker born every minute. The forest carbon credit program is one that would make even him blush.

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