

Guest Commentary

Huge climate benefits from state, local REDD+

By Steve Schwartzman, director of tropical forest policy at the Environmental Defense Fund

California's launch of a comprehensive program to reduce global warming pollution, including the carbon market that opens for business next month, has made the state a world leader in the fight to stop dangerous climate change. California has acted upon recognition that climate change is too urgent a problem to wait for the dysfunctional U.S. Congress or the glacially slow international negotiating process. And it's in good company: Europe, China, Brazil, Australia, and an increasing number of other countries, provinces, states and cities around the world are seeing real advantages to shifting to a low-carbon economy.

The 17 states and provinces from the United States, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru and Nigeria that make up the Governor's Climate and Forests Task Force (GCF) collaboration also see the value of reducing their emissions.

Whereas emissions from California, Europe and other developed countries come primarily from burning fossil fuels, most emissions from tropical states – some of which are larger and have more emissions than many countries – come from cutting down and burning tropical forests. What the GCF states are proposing – and some are doing – is to reduce their state-wide emissions below a previously agreed historical level. This is the very same thing that the EU is already doing and that California will do on Nov. 14th.

The GCF states all anticipate that they will be part of emissions reductions regimes at a national, and ultimately international, level. However, rather than just waiting on countries and the United Nations to act, they prefer to ramp up their capacity now, get valuable experience, and persuade their national governments to follow their lead.

Some states have already made great strides. The Brazilian state of Acre, located in the Amazon, reduced its emissions from deforestation about 60% below its historical average from 2006-2011 – a reduction of about 107 million tons of CO₂ – while raising GDP per capita 33% and increasing its cattle herd, previously a major deforestation driver, by about two-hundred thousand. Detailed land-use zoning, high-resolution deforestation monitoring, and better law enforcement have made Acre a sustainable development leader in the Amazon.

Over the same five-year period, Brazil's leading soybean- and cattle-producing state, Mato Grosso, saw de-

forestation emissions fall more than 70%, or some 884 million tons of CO₂. This occurred as nearly half of the state's ranchers and farmers committed to complying with environmental regulations and signed up for the Rural Environmental Registry, which posts satellite maps of their holdings and compliance pledges online. Agricultural production and GDP also continued to increase.

Acre and Mato Grosso are only two of many tropical states and provinces that have started on the pathway toward low-carbon growth. However, as the global population climbs toward 10 billion, pressure to clear forests for crops and cattle, including illegally, will only increase.

States like Acre and Chiapas, Mexico see clearly that simply punishing law-breakers will not be enough to stop this deforestation. The states recognize they also need at-scale market incentives that can make forest conservation an integral part of development strategies to raise rural peoples' incomes, deliver better services, and give forest and rural communities the benefits of 21st century technology. They see access to carbon markets for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) – including California's – as a huge step in the right direction.

For the REDD+ states, access to carbon markets can help finance the transformation to sustainable agriculture and forestry needed to continue lowering deforestation rates. For businesses, policymakers and many environmentalists, offsets – including REDD+ offsets – are key to controlling costs of their emissions reductions goals, while maintaining environmental integrity. Since REDD+ is, on average, less expensive than reducing fossil fuel use, emissions trading or offset sales between industrial and tropical rural economies can lower the overall costs of emissions reductions, and more global warming pollution can be cut for every dollar spent.

While international climate action is essential, cities, states, provinces and countries around the world are making real contributions to stopping climate change – including through REDD+ programs. State and national REDD+ policies can catalyze critical global climate action, and deserve the full support of California and others for providing both benefits to the forests' rural peoples, and a cost-effective means of producing real emissions reductions.