

The Australian

Honesty is crucial in playing land card

- Cheryl Jones
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AUSTRALIAN Greens deputy leader Christine Milne has accused the federal government of "gaming" the accounting rules for limiting carbon emissions at the UN climate-change talks in Mexico earlier this month.

The charge, denied by Climate Change Minister Greg Combet, relates to carbon accounting in forest management, UN code that loosely translates into logging. It comes as developed countries thrash out details of an expanded treatment of greenhouse gas sources and sinks in the landscape in national carbon inventories after the end of the Kyoto Protocol's first reporting period in 2012.

Biosequestration has always been controversial and open to the temptation, or at least the allegation, of creative carbon accountancy: it is simpler to measure greenhouse gas emissions from a power station or car than to estimate the amount of carbon emitted from or locked up in a forest, even as the science describing the complex land sector firms.

This wider debate got little airplay during the Cancun meeting, but the issues are critical. Experts warn that even with deep cuts to fossil fuel emissions, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate climate change without additional urgent action on forests, farms and grazing lands.

Emissions from the land account for about one-third of total global carbon pollution, says Brendan Mackey, a professor of environmental science at the Australian National University's Fenner School of Environmental Science and Society.

"The world is in a fairly desperate situation," he says. "The international community has agreed we can't ignore emissions from the land. They're too significant a proportion of total emissions."

The stakes are high for Australia, which could meet its target of an unconditional 5 per cent cut on 2000 emissions levels by 2020 more cheaply with a more comprehensive treatment of the land sector in carbon accounting.

In a report, Low Carbon Growth Plan for Australia, Melbourne-based think tank ClimateWorks Australia compares the cost of abatement approaches.

Executive director Anna Skarbek says that after energy-efficiency measures, biosequestration in forestry and agriculture is the second cheapest abatement method. On average, the cost is about half the cost of cutting power station emissions.

Under article 3.3 of the Kyoto Protocol, countries must account for carbon emissions and removals through the clearing and planting of forests since 1990.

Additional rules under article 3.4, which is optional, cover forest, cropland and grazing land management and revegetation. The land sector rules at the centre of the row between Labor and the Greens are among those set out in article 3.4.

Australia and some other countries have been pushing to use projected business-as-usual greenhouse gas emission levels as baselines for national carbon accounting for forest management. Environmentalists say the move would make emission levels look better on paper, skewing the figures. They want baselines to be set at historical levels.

Milne tells Inquirer: "The Greens are concerned that both developed countries like Australia and some developing countries have an interest in gaming the accounting rules for land use, land-use change and forestry, particularly as they may apply to a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol.

"There are a number of accounting tricks that are being proposed that create hot air credits by artificially inflating baselines, and Australia, as has historically been the case, is part of one of those pushes."

However, Combet says Australia's approach provides "greater transparency about the basis for countries accepting future emissions reductions targets". He says: "When a reference level is used, countries are effectively being asked to declare the business-as-usual outcome from their forests. Benefit is then accrued [only] when additional measures reduce emissions below this projected amount."

Combet says some countries have used a single historic year as a reference, but most, including Australia, "have calculated their reference level based on expected future emissions".

Both approaches can be legitimate "as long as countries are transparent in how they have done their calculations", he says, adding that Australia supports an independent review under UN auspices of countries' reference levels.

Such arguments are likely to heat up as countries grapple with a more comprehensive treatment of the land sector.

The present carbon accounting rules have been a barrier to Australia's realisation of the full potential of biosequestration.

Australia has decided against reporting article 3.4 activities, such as rangeland rehabilitation, in the protocol's first commitment period, from 2008 until 2012, for fear that droughts and bushfires could turn sinks into sources. It has sought changes to the land sector rules to "focus on emissions from human activity", according to the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency.

"The present rules under the Kyoto Protocol discourage countries from pursuing emissions-reduction opportunities from land management," the department says. "Like many other countries, Australia is seeking a post-2012 outcome that includes agriculture and forestry more broadly."

"Australia believes the rules must recognise the limited capacity of governments and land managers to reduce emissions from catastrophic or unavoidable natural events."

"Natural events such as bushfires and drought pose a significant risk . . . Australia is seeking to exclude both the emissions from natural events and any benefits we might get from the [bush] regeneration . . . following the event."

The issues remained unresolved by the Cancun talks.

Mackey says the rules create problems because they focus attention on short-term fluxes in greenhouse gases rather than long-term changes in ecosystem carbon stocks in the landscape, which, he says, are "what really matter for climate change" .

He says the debate over biosequestration in developed countries could set the scene for separate global action to arrest deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries.

"There is a strong possibility that we won't have a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol," he says.

"In that case, there would be even more pressure to have harmonised rules and definitions between developed and developing countries in future international agreements."

"Developing countries are not going to agree to rules about emissions from forest management that are more stringent than those applying to Australia and other developed countries."

"They are watching the debate very closely."

Cheryl Jones is a science journalist and co-author of [The Bone Readers: Atoms, Genes and the Politics of Australia's Deep Past](#).

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