The Australian

Forests 'the key to reducing carbon emissions'

- Graham Lloyd, Environment Editor
- From: The Australian

- July 15, 2011 12:00AM

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LONG understood to be the lungs of the earth, the world's great forests are much more important in the carbon cycle than was previously believed, soaking up one-third of all fossil fuel emissions, according to new research.

Standing forests remove 2.4 billion tonnes of carbon a year from the atmosphere, almost five times Australia's total emissions.

On the other side of the carbon ledger, forest logging releases about 10 billion tones of CO2 into the atmosphere each year.

The research, published today in the leading journal, Science, estimates that reducing logging, most notably in Indonesia and Brazil, could yield up to 2.9 billion tonnes of CO2 a year to be traded as carbon permits to offset emissions in developed countries.

The findings underpin global efforts to establish an avoided deforestation scheme, known as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, in the developing world.

They also underpin demands in Australia that some of the $1 billion biodiversity fund established as part of the federal government's carbon tax plan be used to stop logging in state forests.

CSIRO scientist and co-author of the paper, "A Large and Persistent Carbon Sink in the World's Forests", Pep Canadell, said research proved forests should become a priority in any climate protection strategy.

The study showed "the capacity of forests to make a difference for climate protection is much bigger than we thought", Dr Canadell said. "This is because the emission flux from cutting the trees down and releasing the carbon into the air is two to three times what we had been saying in the past."

The research has been undertaken as part of the Australian Climate Change Science Program, funded jointly by the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, the Bureau of Meteorology and the CSIRO.

Dr Canadell said the research showed the amount of carbon available in avoided deforestation schemes was much larger than previously thought.

Forest groups in Australia have long called for the inclusion of state forests in the nation's carbon account. According to the Australian Forest and Climate Alliance, state forest logging in Tasmania, Victoria and NSW contributes an estimated 10 per cent of Australia's emissions total.

Wilderness Society national campaign director Lyndon Schneiders said recognising the carbon potential of forests was a "game changer".

"The combined values of carbon sinks, biodiversity and ecological services, such as clean water, provided by forests make it imperative that urgent steps are taken to conserve what's left," Mr Schneiders said.

Dr Canadell said forest management was an issue for individual governments. For developing countries, he said, the research suggested the benefits of avoiding deforestation through the UN-backed REDD scheme were larger than previously appreciated.

Dr Canadell said a surprising finding was the large capacity of tropical forest regrowth to remove atmospheric CO2.

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