

Forests urged as new front in global warming fight

By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

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Forest preservation should be the new front in the fight against global warming with Third World nations earning cash for protecting trees, tropical countries told a U.N. climate conference on Wednesday.

"The present state of affairs is untenable," Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica wrote in a proposal backed by seven other developing nations, complaining that they lacked incentives to slow logging or forest clearance for farming.

"Globally ... tropical deforestation is the second leading cause of climate change behind fossil fuel combustion," they said in the report to a 190-country climate meeting in Montreal from November 28-December 9.

Most efforts to curb global warming center on reining in emissions from burning fossil fuels in power plants, factories and cars in industrial nations. But trees soak up carbon dioxide, the main gas blamed for global warming, as they grow. They release it when they die and rot.

The report suggested that tropical nations that slow the rate of deforestation -- perhaps tracked from space by satellites -- might win cash incentives from rich nations to encourage better management and more tree plantings.

It estimated that deforestation, from the Amazon to Africa, represented losses of billions of dollars. Forests are home to half the species living on land and a key source of food, building materials and medicines for people.



Reuters Photo: A logging company's tractor sits on the side of a road that has been cut...

LOST FORESTS

A net 7.3 million hectares (18.04 million acres) of forests -- the size of Panama or Sierra Leone -- was lost each year from 2000-2005, according to United Nations data.

The conference agreed to study the proposal and report back in a year's time. The proposal also had backing from Bolivia, the Central African Republic, Chile, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

Richard Kinley, acting head of the secretariat of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, said the reaction among delegations was "very positive."

"We'd be very interested in exploring it further," said Sarah Hendry, head of the British delegation. Britain holds the European Union's rotating presidency. Some delegates warned, however, that it was extremely hard to measure forest area.

The Montreal talks are also looking at ways to widen a U.N.-led fight against global warming to involve poor nations and the United States and Australia, the two main industrial nations outside the U.N.'s Kyoto Protocol.

Under Kyoto, about 40 industrial states are trying to cut emissions by 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12 to curb warming that may cause catastrophic effects including more powerful storms, rising sea levels and more desertification.

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