

Carbon Sequestration

Carbon sequestration refers to the storage of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere by soils, trees, crops, and other plants. Carbon “sinks” such as farmland, rangeland, and forests can make a great contribution to reducing net greenhouse gas emissions. Conservation activities such as planting trees on marginal lands, restoring degraded soils, and adopting best management practices that improve water quality, soil quality, and habitat protection, also have the added benefit of absorbing carbon.

Carbon Sinks and the Kyoto Protocol

The Kyoto Protocol recognizes that sinks must be included as part of an economically and environmentally sound approach to climate change—an approach that the United States worked hard to achieve. Specifically, Article 3.3 of the Protocol allows certain forestry activities—afforestation, reforestation, and deforestation—to be counted toward a party’s reduction commitments. Moreover, Article 3.4 allows the Parties of the Protocol to add additional sink activities, such as those related to agricultural soils.

Progress

In 1998, the Parties agreed to move forward with a process to define, measure and verify various categories of carbon sinks. This process includes:

The **IPCC Special Report on Land Use Change Issues**. The Parties tasked the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) with conducting a comprehensive study on land-use, land-use change, and forestry activities. Authors of the Special Report include international technical experts. The Special Report will be released in Spring 2000.

Workshops on Land Use Change and Forestry. In addition, the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) held two workshops on land use, land use change and forestry issues. The first workshop was held in Rome in September 1998 and the second was held in Indianapolis, Indiana in April 1999. The workshops gave the parties the opportunity to discuss methodological and technical issues related to additional sink categories.

Next Steps

Following the release of the IPCC Special Report next Spring, a workshop will be held to consider its results and to prepare the way for decisions on sinks at the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the UNCCC (“CoP-6”). Considering the complexity associated with these issues, it is critical that the Parties work together to lay out a structure for decision-making between CoP-5 and CoP-6, discuss the criteria for decision-making, and the role of data and information within that framework.

The United States seeks a comprehensive approach to the treatment of sinks that is both environmentally and scientifically sound. Activities added to Article 3.4 should be cost effective, quantifiable and verifiable; cover all relevant sources, sinks, and reservoirs of greenhouse gases; promote sustainable management; and promote sustainable agriculture in light of climate change considerations. The United States looks forward to continuing to engage in a substantive discussion on these land use change issues at CoP-5/SBSTA-11.