

Statement From American Forests Regarding Trees and Climate Change

To Editor, Time Magazine:

Twice in your global warming issue (April, 9, 2007, "51 Things You Can Do" and "What Now?") you maintain that planting trees in temperate zones could cause global warming. That is an unfortunate misinterpretation of the science.

The 2005 study by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory developed a model to explore the effects of "extreme land cover changes" on climate (i.e., on a global map, converting to forest every single cell currently occupied by any vegetation, such as grasses, crops, shrubs, or trees). The study acknowledges that it does not "reproduce any observed pattern of land cover change" nor does it "realistically simulate possible future scenarios;" rather it seeks to "bracket the magnitude of temperature that is possible in the climate system due to land cover change."

So, the study takes an extreme approach to land cover change and models an unrealistic future scenario—a 100 percent conversion to forest of all areas that currently have any vegetation. And what does it find? A key finding is that global replacement of current vegetation with forests in the northern hemisphere mid-latitude regions of the world might result in a net cooling due to "carbon cycle effects" over a "decadal time scale," perhaps 80 years or so, but a net warming due largely to the "albedo effect" over a "century time scale."

In sum, while the study provides some useful information, it is built on a global-scale model and narrowly-focused, unrealistic assumptions, and it comes up with conclusions which could have the effect of stalling or preventing all forest-related projects in the northern mid-latitudes. This would be very unfortunate. Forest restoration projects can be very effective, low cost, and practical approaches to addressing climate-change concerns, if they are well-designed, place-based, and consider both short- and long-term implications related to forest growth and carbon cycles.

Sincerely,

Deborah Gangloff, Ph.D.
Executive Director
American Forests
734 15th Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
202/737-1944 X 232
www.americanforests.org