Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

Text of Advice given to the Emissions Trading Scheme Review Select Committee

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Impact of the ETS on Indigenous Land Cover

Today, I will make recommendations about two matters: carbon stock tables and wilding pines.

This is an extension to our earlier advice to this select committee: the short report entitled "Impact of the ETS on Indigenous Land Cover – Recommendations".

Carbon stock tables

We can think of useful forests being of two types.

First: forests to be harvested. These ideally comprise exotic species that yield good timber, and sequester carbon at a relatively fast rate.

Second: forests not to be harvested. These ideally are indigenous forests and are particularly useful on steep hill country that has marginal value for pastoral production. They sequester carbon at a lower rate than exotics, but over the long term store more carbon. (Pines on hill sides eventually fall down and rot.) Such indigenous forests prevent soil erosion, and reduce sediment containing phosphate washing into creeks, thus decreasing flood risk and degradation of water quality. They also help protect biodiversity.

New Zealand needs both timber production and non-harvest/indigenous forests.

But we must look beyond just carbon.

We must consider the ideal long term balance between exotic and indigenous forests. If we don't want vast exotic plantations we need to do something different now.

The ETS strengthens existing incentives for exotics species at the expense of indigenous species. A particular problem is the current carbon look-up tables in the Forestry Regulations, which define how many credits a particular forest can earn.

The carbon look-up tables are detailed for pine. The carbon storage rates vary by region and forest age. But there is only one carbon look-up table for indigenous forests, and it assumes a very low flat rate of 3 tonnes CO_2/hectare/year. Landcare have shown the rate of carbon storage in regenerating manuka/kanuka to be 2 to 3 times greater than this.

Indigenous forests will never sequester carbon as fast as exotic forests over the short term.

But current regulations unjustifiably discourage planting of, or reversion to, indigenous forests.

MAF are reportedly working on better carbon look-up tables, but we have not seen any evidence so far. In the meantime, owners of indigenous forests are being disadvantaged.

I recommend the committee endorses amending the indigenous carbon look-up tables in the forestry regulations as soon as possible, to make them consistent with the best available scientific information.

I recommend the committee establish when the amended carbon look-up tables will be available.

Wilding Pines

I recently released a report on the South Island high country. There, and in parts of the North Island, wilding conifers are bolting.

Seeds can travel up to 30km. I am told there are now wildings on the Coronet Peak ski field. And at least one runholder has been driven off land by wilding pines.

I recently visited Southland. The Regional Council considers the greatest land cover problem in Southland to be an area called Mid Dome. 250 hectares of Mid Dome was originally planted with pines to control soil erosion, but the wildings from this original planting now cover a much larger area. A Charitable Trust is working hard to eliminate the pines, but faces a potentially large ETS liability from removing the pines that were originally planted.

Under the current ETS tree weeds are eligible to earn carbon credits. This creates a disincentive to control wildings.

Wildings are not good for timber. They grow into an impenetrable thicket of spindly trees. And if we let tree weed forests grow for their carbon sequestration, keeping them inside their intended boundaries will be very difficult.

But I have heard the suggestion that "letting wildings go" would be a great way of sequestering carbon.

As a country, we need to make a conscious and deliberative decision about wilding pines.

I recommend that it is established in which circumstances, if any, wilding pines might be appropriate for carbon sequestration.