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U.S. to join new \$280M forest protection fund

Jean Chemnick and Tiffany Stecker, E&E reporters

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WARSAW, Poland -- The U.S. State Department pledged \$25 million today as part of a major new \$280 million funding initiative aimed at slowing deforestation and stemming its effect on world carbon emissions.

Announced on the sidelines of annual U.N. climate change negotiations here, the United States joined Norway, the United Kingdom and the World Bank in launching the "BioCarbon Fund Initiative for Sustainable Forest Landscapes." The fund will provide incentives to developing countries that are taking steps to limit the chopping and razing of trees under the United Nations' Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program, or REDD+.

The United States will be the new fund's smallest national donor, compared with Norway's \$135 million and the United Kingdom's \$120 million. But the announcement is the first offer of new financial assistance that the world's wealthiest nation has brought to Warsaw and is likely to be its last.

"We know that public-sector engagement alone is not sufficient to alter the structural drivers of deforestation," said U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change Todd Stern. "We must also change the signals provided by the private sector to forest communities."

He argued that the initiative's role for the private sector is essential to its success "and underscores the importance of engaging the private sector as partners, not adversaries, in the fight against climate change."

The fund will be administered by the World Bank's BioCarbon Fund, a public-private initiative aimed at finding ways to sequester carbon.

Secretary of State John Kerry said in a video statement accompanying the announcement that initiatives like the new fund are critical because deforestation and its threat to the climate are "real, grave and growing."

The world is losing its forests at a rate of 13 million hectares (32 million acres) a year, he noted, contributing one-third of the world's atmospheric carbon dioxide emissions. The share is higher in developing countries where forests are being razed to make way for agriculture.

"This isn't just an environmental issue; it's an economic issue, it's an energy issue," Kerry said. "It's an issue that touches on our deepest values and our basic sense of responsibility as stewards of this fragile planet that we're

privileged to inhabit."

Kerry also noted that the fund will be the State Department's largest investment to date in a deforestation program but promised that it would not be the last substantial one made on his watch.

But some observers expressed disappointment that the U.S. and its partners didn't put forward a more substantial sum.

"The pledges are not as much as expected, and that will hinder the potential emissions reductions from REDD+," said Pipa Elias, a forests expert with the Union of Concerned Scientists' Tropical Forests and Climate Initiative.

She added that it did show a "budding" interest by developed nations in combating emissions linked to deforestation. "We have got to take what we can get, improve the overall REDD+ package, and push for more."

Promises turn into 'definite' dollars

REDD+ finance, the money needed to set up and implement a system that pays countries to leave forests standing, has followed a long road since the 2007 U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in Bali, Indonesia, where nations pledged to take meaningful action to reduce emissions from deforestation. A 2008 study found it would cost between \$17.2 billion and \$28 billion per year to cut the global rate of deforestation in half.

According to a recent [policy brief](#) from the Overseas Development Institute, \$2.72 billion has been pledged for REDD+ since 2007 through five multilateral funds and two bilateral funds, more than half of it to Indonesia and Brazil. About one-tenth of the pledges have been disbursed to projects on the ground.

The leading country for pledging to date has been Norway, which has offered about \$1.6 billion, followed by the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany.

Since the 2009 climate conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, there haven't been any substantial pledges to fund REDD+ past 2012, Elias said. Although Norway has said it will fund REDD+ through 2020, a concrete commitment has been absent.

"That's a pretty big assumption in today's economy," said Elias of a commitment through 2020. "Now, that's definite."

REDD+ negotiators expect diplomats in Warsaw this week to approve text on five scientific and technical decisions that will lay the groundwork for finance. These include: human rights and environmental safeguards; the definitions of drivers of deforestation; ways for measuring countries' reference levels, or the base line upon which to measure forest loss; monitoring, reporting and verification of emissions reduction; and the creation of a national forest monitoring system.

Besides the BioCarbon Fund, the World Bank houses two other major coffers for REDD+, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility and the Forest Investment Fund. The FCPF is divided into two funds, one to help countries get ready to implement a REDD+ program and another to pay for verified emissions reductions.

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