

Forest plan hangs in balance at climate conference

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In this Nov. 30, 2010 file photo, Mayan Indian Pedro Chuc May collects sap from a tree known as a gum tree to produce natural chewing gum in Betania, Mexico. A U.N. program, under debate at the climate change conference in Cancun, could help May and millions of others who live in forests earn more while slowing the deforestation that accounts for one-fifth of the global carbon dioxide emissions blamed for warming the planet. (AP Photo/Eduardo Verdugo, File)

(AP) -- Pedro Chuc May climbs a big zapote tree, braces himself against the trunk with a rope sling and uses his sharp machete to slash v-shaped cuts in the rough bark to let the tree's resin - the base for natural chewing gum - flow into a cut-off soda bottle below.

Chuc May's ancient Mayan chicle-tapping technique doesn't harm the trees, if done right, but it earns him only about \$450 per year.

A U.N. program under debate at the [climate change conference](#) in Cancun, a few hours north of his patch of trees, could help May and millions of others who live in the world's forests earn more while slowing the deforestation that accounts for one-fifth of the [carbon dioxide emissions](#) blamed for warming the planet.

For Chuc, it might mean a new distributor and a fairer price. He could be paid to plant trees, care for the forest, fight fires or be hired as a forest ranger - just about anything that helps keep forests standing and prevents the release of CO₂ into the atmosphere.

It's a simple idea with a complicated name - Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and [Forest Degradation](#), or REDD.

Unlike old piecemeal forest-protection efforts, REDD is a global effort with standards, monitoring and a pay-for-results system that would give people incentives to leave their forests standing and to keep from emitting more carbon into the atmosphere.

The delegates in Cancun are trying to hammer out just what shape it will take: Who will administer it, who will fund it, who will enforce it and even what some of its most basic rules will be.

Anything that protects forests - alternate income for communities, solar panels, forest guards, mapping efforts - could be included in REDD.

Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, whose country has already committed \$1 billion to one of the first projects, calls REDD "the fastest, the cheapest and easiest way" to reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon calls it a way "to reduce both poverty and emissions at the same time."

The program was touted as one of the biggest potential deals at Cancun, but the talks have been stymied by disagreements over how to finance and evaluate projects, and over safeguards to guarantee that forest-dwellers won't be evicted by the process.

A watered-down text may be all negotiators can achieve when the conference ends on Friday. But some poor countries would need immediate aid to prepare for the plan's rigorous accounting procedures.

The world is still losing about 13 million acres (5.2 million hectares) of forests to logging per year, an area about the size of Costa Rica. While that is down from 21 million acres (8.3 million hectares) a year in the 1990s, the world is still faced with the question of what to do with as much as a billion hectares of degraded forest land where most trees have already been cut down.

The REDD negotiations have turned into minefields because countries disagree whether companies in rich countries should be able to use sponsorship of green projects in the developing world as a way to offset pollution in their home countries.

Proponents say such markets can help fund the estimated \$30 billion annual cost of reducing deforestation by 50 percent.

But critics say that would mean restricting the economic options of the countries with forests, and the people who live there, so that big companies can go on polluting and rich countries can go on producing.

"We're not here to turn nature into a good, an asset," Bolivian President Evo Morales told the Cancun conference on Thursday. "The forests are

sacred to the peoples of the world and we cannot allow new policies that seek to ensure only the survival of capitalism."

The program "is quite possibly ... the largest land grab of all time," wrote Jihan Gearon of the indigenous Environmental Network. Demonstrators from pro-Indian and environmental groups paraded through the conferences halls at Cancun, shouting "No, no, no REDD!"

About \$4.5 billion in REDD funding has been promised by donor governments, though only about one-sixth of that has been released. But even governments that might get the aid don't agree with each other.

Some countries want to weaken requirements that forest communities give full, informed consent to REDD programs, arguing that such strict standards may be hard to meet, said Louis Verchot of the Center for International Forestry Research.

Others insist on strong protection for the rights of native forest dwellers who depend on their environment.

"The forest is our supermarket, our hardware store and our health clinic," said Mirna Cunningham, a Miskita Indian from Nicaragua."

Many also fear money will be siphoned off by "carbon cowboys," fly-by-night operators who set up conservation programs of questionable value, take their fees and disappear.

To prevent that, REDD would require developing countries, mainly those in the world's tropical forest belt, to map woodlands, measure the emissions caused by logging and then draw up a plan to reduce them as a condition for receiving money.

Most national governments also want to control all programs in their

territories, saying that would avoid surreptitious logging and encroachment by agriculture, problems that plagued piecemeal conservation programs in the past, as loggers banned from one parcel simply moved next door.

Many also argue that third-party verification of the programs could violate their national sovereignty.

In any case, most agree that a global approach with verifiable standards is needed; the old piecemeal approach wasn't up to the scale of the problem.

"The old idea was that you enriched families, so they wouldn't have to go into the forest and chop down trees with machetes," said Tony Simmons, of the World Agroforestry Center. "In many places we've enriched those families and now they can afford to buy chain saws and they can really go into the forests and do some damage."

But the new REDD system will take years to put in place. Deficit-ridden developed countries may be slow to fork over donations and some poor countries can't even start until they get seed money to make inventories of their forests and plans for managing them.

Experts say unless some standard practices are adopted everywhere, markets won't touch forest-based carbon credits.

Bolivia opposed a recent REDD draft agreement because it included market involvement and lacked sufficient safeguards for Indian communities.

Pablo Solon, who represents Bolivia at the Cancun talks, doesn't want to see the forest used just as a storage lot for carbon: If a tree is merely a carbon-capture machine, what's to stop replacement of natural forests

with plantations of easily harvestable trees? Would trees be favored over other valuable ecosystems, like peat bogs and mangroves?

Still, Bolivia desperately needs funds.

"The heat level has increased. The number of fires we normally have has risen by a factor of three," Solon said. "We need planes, infrastructure, forest rangers and satellite equipment to work with."

Almost anything can fit in REDD, if it stops carbon emissions from forests.

Guyanese President Bharrat Jagdeo plans to use his money from Norway's REDD donations to buy families solar panels so they won't need wood for cooking fuel, as well as surveying to get them clear land titles and a \$25,000 economic development grant for each Indian village. But he hasn't been able to get the money yet, because of what he calls bureaucracy. "It's a nightmare," he said.

Fire-prevention measures might be eligible: Daniel Nepstad of the Amazon Environmental Research Institute says emissions from forest fires now often exceed the carbon released from logging and the erosion of clear-cut lands.

At the other side of the globe, Indonesia has signed a \$1 billion deal with Norway, part of it to get Indonesia ready for REDD through administrative reform, planning and management. Indonesia is the third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, mainly because of deforestation.

Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, who heads up the Indonesian government's new multi-agency task force, lays out some of the challenges: The forestry system is plagued by corruption. Every government agency has

its own maps, often conflicting, of where forest boundaries lie. While the government has banned new logging permits, there are hundreds of existing ones the government says it cannot cancel.

In one of the first REDD scandals, Greenpeace International accused the Indonesian government of promoting the expansion of wood-pulp and palm-oil plantations on land that was misclassified as degraded. It says the program could put at risk forested areas the size of Norway and Denmark combined, including 50 percent of forested orangutan habitat.

Mangkusubroto's deputy, Heru Prasetyo, said the Greenpeace report was based on old data and old plans that are being changed. Mangkusubroto says "we have plenty of degraded land" where commercial plantations could expand without touching pristine woods. But he acknowledges wearily, "The policy is great, but try to enforce it through our system, that's hard."

Ajit Joy, who heads the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime in Indonesia, estimates that nearly 45 percent of the foreign wood exported to China and the United States is illegally logged.

Conviction rates for illegal logging are low, and most of those caught are truck drivers or other small fish, Joy said.

"This wood is moved in big trucks, and how could this wood pass through without corruption and connivance ... there are criminal gangs involved, there are big brokers," Joy said.

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