

Control pests, cut carbon losses

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A LEADING Scion tree scientist has welcomed a Forest & Bird report identifying the impact greater pest control could have on New Zealand's carbon losses and how to reduce them.

The Forest & Bird Protecting Our Natural Ecosystems' Carbon Sinks report explores another approach to build more long-term carbon sequestration into forest systems beyond more immediate exotic forestry plantings.

The latest Climate Change Commission recommendations are for NZ to plant an additional 30,000ha of native forests every year for the next decade. This would include significant plantings on retired sheep and beef country.

The report does not dismiss this approach, but does point to how more intensive control of this country's herbivore pests in existing native forests could achieve significant effects in sequestering carbon.

As recently as 2002-2014, West Coast's podocarp forests experienced a plummeting in carbon sequestered, now losing 3.4 million tonnes a year of CO₂ due to massive pest infestations.

This is the equivalent to a 20% increase in emissions from the vehicle fleet.

Overall, the report estimates about 8.4m tonnes of CO₂ a year is capable of being saved through reduced pest damage in sequestering native forest, or 60% of all vehicle emissions.

The report estimates potentially sequestered carbon from better pest management could range from -.75m tonnes a year at the lower end, to 17.5m tonnes at the upper end, with 8.4m tonnes the midpoint.

Scion researcher Dr Tim Payn says the report has picked up on a valuable part of NZ's carbon reduction efforts.

"Basically, pest control will have a positive effect, but we also have to remember the benefits will be a longtime coming," Payn said.

He says it did not mean pest control should be ramped up at the cost of reducing native forest and exotic plantings, but rather the three had to be combined together.

With this came some potential policy mixes that could include farmers, with pest control in existing bush being recognised, along with grants for increasing native plantings at the same time. Drystock farms are estimated to



OPPORTUNITY: Scion researcher Dr Tim Payn says the Forest & Bird report on pest damage highlighted another aspect of carbon losses that could be addressed immediately.

hold about 1.5m hectares or 24% of NZ's native forest area.

A study released last year by Beef + Lamb NZ highlighted how the sector was well positioned, with respect to the area of native bush it had covenanted and its role in carbon sequestration.

Forest & Bird chief executive Kevin Hague says farmland currently being retired and allowed to regenerate, as well as newly planted permanent native forest sinks, will need protection from browsing mammals or all the work will be wasted.

The Forest & Bird report cites "parsimonious" budget allocations through decades for undermining forests' potential sequestration abilities.

Hague says possums, deer, wallabies, goats, pigs, chamois and tahr have been working through native forests and tussock lands.

"This has destroyed the natural ability of native ecosystems to be the best carbon sinks on land," Hague said.

He called for increased coordination and research to

reduce browsing pests and restore carbon sequestration in native forests.

"The work needs to be over and above NZ's climate commitments to eliminate fossil fuel emissions and substantially cut agricultural emissions as part of our fair share of global efforts to help keep warming below 1.5degC.

"It could even help make Aotearoa carbon positive within a few decades," he said.

The report calls for significant reductions in the number of browsing species in NZ to deliver a win-win for native species protection and carbon sequestration.

This included a call for more coordinated predator control and new technologies to aid in pest control.

Payn was hopeful efforts under the He Waka Eke Noa partnership may deliver more opportunities for farmers to capitalise on the vast tracts of forests under their stewardship, possibly including pre-1990s forests in carbon allowances.

He was heartened by the level of interest farmers were showing in assorted forest types and interest in putting the 'right tree in the right place'.

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