

Planting a trillion trees is a worthwhile undertaking. And not remotely enough

11 February 2020



When a bathtub is overflowing, common sense says to turn off the faucet before mopping up the floor.

A Republican plan to address climate change would contravene that logic by prioritizing the drawdown of carbon already present in the atmosphere over curbing greenhouse gas emissions from the ongoing use of fossil fuels.

The Trillion Trees Act is the brainchild of Congressman Bruce Westerman of Arkansas, a graduate of Yale's forestry school and a licensed forester. His bill would establish a national goal for planting trees — not literally a trillion, but 100 billion over 30 years — for the purpose of capturing and sequestering atmospheric carbon, a primary driver of global warming.

Westerman's push is tied to the Trillion Tree Initiative, a program of the World Economic Forum. At the forum's annual meeting in Davos last month, President Trump — without using the words "climate" or "carbon" — announced that the U.S. would back the program.

Planting trees to capture carbon is not a new idea. It was an important component of the 1992 Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement of 2015. A United Nations program, begun in 2008, focuses on land-use reform and preventing deforestation. Many nations around the world — Germany, Canada, Kenya and Pakistan are examples — have launched ambitious tree-planting projects over the past decade. Last August, volunteers in India planted 220 million trees in a single day.



Morning sun brings out the green of the Himalayan cedars covered in fresh snow in Dharmsala, India, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. (Ashwini Bhatia/AP)

The recent groundswell of enthusiasm for tree planting is due in part to the work of Thomas Crowther, a Swiss ecologist whose lab in 2019 published a paper on the potential of global reforestation to sequester carbon.

According to Crowther's research, there is enough land to plant 1.2 trillion trees in addition to the 3 trillion currently on the planet, without encroaching on agricultural areas or cities. As the trees mature, the increase in biomass would substantially diminish carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

It is a seductive vision: vast armies of trees, each of them a stalwart soldier standing tall, dedicated to its sole task of ingesting carbon to be locked away for a century in roots and wood.

But Crowther's calculations immediately drew criticism from climate scientists who pointed out that his team made some questionable assumptions and grossly overestimated the amount of additional carbon that new forests could store.

Source: <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/02/11/climate-change-trump-1-trillion-trees-frederick-hewett>