

Thriving in Challenging Times

This week's column is associated with Thriving in Challenging Times, a statewide Extension initiative to help Alabamians cope with the recent economic downturn. Go to www.aces.edu and click on the piggy bank or call 205-926-3117 for more information:

Yes, Virginia, money does grow on trees, at least if you are a forestland owner who is considering planting trees or using existing plantings to earn carbon credits. A growing body of research has revealed that greenhouse gases — water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane and ozone, to name a few — generated by both natural and manmade processes, have increased in recent decades.

These gases are indispensable in creating the greenhouse effect that warms the earth and sustains life. But a growing number of scientists fear excessive emissions of these greenhouse gases, partly due to industrial activities, are causing excessive warming of the atmosphere — warming that is already negatively affecting the earth's environment.

What can be done about it? Scientists at the Center for Atmospheric Research believe one solution is carbon credit exchanges — proactive efforts by some sectors of the economy, including forestry, to offset higher-than-desired emissions of carbon dioxide by other sectors of the economy.

One of these proactive players may turn out to be forestland owners, who can use existing and future tree plantings to store carbon in the ground, says Beau Brodbeck, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System regional agent specializing in forestry, wildlife and natural resources. In the case of carbon dioxide, for example, a tree can absorb an estimated 48 pounds, while an acre of trees can absorb as much as 2 tons a year, storing the carbon in leaves, branches and trunks, Brodbeck says.

A program promoting this sort of carbon storage is now in place. The program, based on the carbon credit concept, was created in response to findings about global warming and formalized by an agreement stemming from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which seeks a 5.2 percent reduction in greenhouse gases compared to emissions in 1990. Although the U.S. is not a signatory, industries can cooperate with forest owners voluntarily.

Industries located within countries that signed the pact are now required to reduce greenhouse emissions, which they essentially can do in one of two ways: either by reducing emissions through cleaner technologies or by offsetting their emissions through a carbon credit exchange program, Brodbeck says.

And this is where Alabama forest owners may play a role. Our state's rich reserve of forestland may turn to be an especially lucrative source of carbon credits. Aforestation — planting trees in old agricultural fields — is an option. So are long-term forest preservations within conservation easements and sustainable forest management.

In fact, a mechanism is already in place — the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX) — to provide carbon credits. Started in 2003, CCX is already actively trading and providing opportunities for forestland owners around the country, Brodbeck says. Instead of directly purchasing carbon credits, they work through what are known as aggregators, companies that seek carbon credits and combine them into packages sold on CCX.

Alabama has already had one small parcel sold on CCX, with others possible in the near future. However, there are requirements and paperwork involved in enrollment. Brodbeck urges anyone wanting more information to visit **www.chicagoclimatex.com**