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Study Finds COP30 Climate Pledges Lean Heavily on Land-Based Carbon Removal Over Reducing Emissions by Protecting Forests

Analysis links the lack of forest action in climate pledges to debt, trade and tax policies that force countries to rely on forest destruction for financial survival; outlines reforms critical for both forest preservation and fight against climate change

Belém, Brazil (12 November 2025) — An analysis of national climate plans released today at the COP30 climate summit warns that countries are failing to carry out the core work required to reduce emissions by halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation, and are instead pushing carbon removal schemes, such as large-scale tree planting, to levels that are far beyond what's achievable.

[The report](#) from a global consortium of experts led by the University of Melbourne explains why countries are relying on unrealistic levels of land-based efforts to achieve net-zero emissions — rather than pursuing more realistic climate solutions that involve protecting existing forests and phasing out fossil fuels.

It points out that while forest advocates often link the lack of action to a lack of finance for forest protection, the real impediment is a global economic system that pits economic development against ecosystem preservation. And it outlines a series of reforms, many already underway, that can resolve this fundamental conflict and align critical climate and biodiversity goals with economic goals.

“Why are so many countries ignoring forest protection as a key pillar of climate targets? The answer is that they live in a world where heavy sovereign debt burdens and industry-friendly tax and trade policies force many of them to exploit forests to keep their economies from crashing,” said Kate Dooley, lead author of the report, *The Land Gap 2025*, and a researcher at the University of Melbourne. “Yet the bitter irony is that, over the long-term, healthy forests are essential to healthy economies due to the climate benefits, job opportunities and ecosystem services they provide.”

The report identifies two essential flaws in national climate plans submitted for COP30 — a “land gap” involving a chasm between governments’ reliance on land to achieve their carbon mitigation goals and what’s actually achievable; and a “forest gap” involving the gap between global commitments to halt deforestation and forest degradation by 2030 and the likely outcomes of country pledges.

The land gap assessment examines pledges delivered at COP30 (as of October 31). It focuses on country pledges to use land-based carbon removal initiatives such as large-scale tree planting, forest restoration, and bioenergy capture and storage projects to meet their obligations under the 2015 Paris Agreement. It found that countries would have to devote just over 1 billion hectares of land — an area larger than the size of Australia — to carbon removal to achieve their targets, which represents a slight increase compared to the Land Gap report from 2022.

Moreover, the new study reveals that much of the promised savings would take decades to materialize. It also warns that the amount of land required to achieve such a massive level of carbon removal would put lands critical to the survival of marginalized groups like Indigenous peoples, local communities and smallholder farmers at risk.

Meanwhile, the authors note that “pledges for reducing emissions through halting and reversing deforestation and degradation are limited” in national plans. They discovered the plans generate a significant forest gap between the firm promises countries made at COP28 in Dubai to halt and reverse deforestation and forest degradation by 2030 and the likely outcome of pledges now in play at COP30. The report shows that the annual rate of deforestation globally would still be 4 million hectares in 2030, with another 16 million hectares of forests being degraded — a forest gap of 20 million hectares.

The 2025 Land Gap assessment covers all pledges countries have submitted to the United Nation’s climate secretariat, including climate plans known as “nationally determined contributions,” or NDCs, and long-term strategies for 2050. It is updated from the 2022 analysis to include new pledges submitted in the year prior to COP30, with less than 40% of parties to the Paris Agreement having submitted a new NDC.

Debt, Tax and Trade: Unlocking Finance by Confronting the Triple Threat to Forests

The authors of the report delve deeper into underlying forces that have produced the overemphasis on land-based carbon removal schemes and underemphasis on forest protection in national climate plans. And they conclude that if leaders at COP30 want to meet their commitments to reduce carbon and protect forests, they need to seek reforms to an outdated economic system, with a focus on development pathways that unlock financing for forests by linking economic resilience to ecosystem resilience.

“That’s because the biggest threat to forests today — and the carbon they hold — is a global economic system shaped by rules and financial flows that lock many countries, especially in the Global South, into a heavy reliance on commercial logging, mining and industrial-scale crop production simply to pay for basic necessities,” said Dr. Rebecca Ray, of Boston University’s Global Development Policy Center. “Reshaping those rules could relieve pressure to exploit forests to meet short-term obligations, which could have an immediate impact on deforestation levels while freeing up large amounts of money to invest in forests.”

The authors noted that today much of the global push to protect forests revolves around innovative financing mechanisms, like the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), which they said are important but do not address the full range of powerful forces driving forest destruction. For example, they said that the TFFF is expected to generate \$3 to \$4 billion per year while the [Forest Declaration Assessment](#) released in advance of COP30 estimates that countries would need \$117 to \$299 billion per year to achieve their 2030 goals for forest protection.

However, they said such amounts could be reached through reforms in areas like sovereign debt burdens and tax and trade policy to address the “inherent contradictions between economic development and ecosystem preservation” that are baked into the prevailing economic order.

According to the report they include:

- **Providing debt relief:** The report finds the current approach of resolving debt crises involves payment schedules that deepen many countries’ dependence on short-term commodity revenue, pushing plantations, mines and oil wells into previously intact ecosystems — and pushing out traditional communities. The report warns that countries in “notable centers of biodiversity” in the Amazon and Congo basins as well as in Southeast Asia are facing debt payment schedules and the imposition of austerity provisions that require them to rapidly expand exports or face a downgrade in credit, something they can only accomplish by sacrificing their forests. It points to Cameroon, where there has been a dramatic rise in forest loss and degradation over the last 20 years because of debt burdens and the imposition of austerity requirements from the IMF which have forced the country to increase hardwood production and clear forests for cotton and cocoa production. The report notes that there are debt-relief efforts underway that can offer countries the “fiscal breathing space” to regulate commodity production in ways that support forest protection, but that initiatives have been too slow and lack necessary ambition.
- **Pursuing tax reforms:** The report reveals that cross-border tax abuse and illicit financial flows undermine forest and biodiversity protection by depriving Global South countries, in particular, of essential revenue. International financial secrecy also shields multinational corporations and economic elites from accountability and facilitates environmental criminality, including illegal logging and land conversion which is driving deforestation. It singles out the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation as representing a historic opportunity to reorganize the global distribution of taxing rights, increase financial transparency, democratise tax policymaking, confront abusive tax practices and ultimately create an international tax system for sustainable development. The report also calls on national governments to enact much needed reforms. It cites proposals advanced by Brazil, through its leadership of the G20, to create a “wealth tax” that could generate \$200 to \$500 billion annually.
- **Revising trade rules:** The report finds that efforts to use trade policy to fight forest loss have fallen short because they are largely focused on limiting trade in illegal wood

products and those that have caused land conversion. They have not focused on trade rules that encourage the expansion of industrial-scale agricultural production, which is the single largest driver of deforestation. The authors note that trade rules “reinforce the policy and economic power” of global commodity traders at the expense of local producers, especially smallholder farmers, and undermine the authority of national governments to police environmentally harmful practices. They believe one promising avenue of reform involves a number of emerging movements that seek to shift agriculture trade policies from their current focus on protecting commodity traders to regimes that prioritize sustainable food systems, smallholder farmers and resilient ecosystems.

“There is an urgent need for leaders at COP30 to acknowledge that we will not make progress in the fight against climate change — especially when it comes to protecting forests — if we don’t address the fundamental elements of our economic system that are impeding change,” said Kate Horner, co-lead author of the *The Land Gap 2025* report. “Reform will be difficult but there are many efforts already underway to disrupt the status quo that could lead us to healthier economies, forests and communities. And the consequences of failure — the continued destruction of the world’s remaining forests and a planet on a collision course with a climate catastrophe — should be sufficient motivation to act.”

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