

Reasons to save the forests

Vancouver firm's mandate is to restore and protect land essential to climate change mitigation

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A Vancouver-based company that repairs broken ecosystems sees a bright future in carbon offsets.

Robert Falls, CEO of Ecosystem Restoration Associates Inc., says he believes that his firm will get a major boost from a September meeting in New York -- Protecting Rainforest Communities and Our Climate, which focused on the impact of deforestation on global warming.



"The initial thing that came out of this is that it's finally recognized that greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation is larger than emissions from vehicles, aircraft, ships and trains combined," Falls, who attended the two-day event, said in an interview. "And we're in the business of restoring and protecting forest ecosystems. This is critical for our company."

CREDIT:

Robert Falls is CEO of Ecosystem Restoration Associates Inc., which repairs broken ecosystems by selling carbon offsets.

Falls said the event, which gathered together many global leaders (including two Nobel laureates: former U.S. vice-president Al Gore and Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement), reinforced the idea that in addressing the challenge of climate change, "forest restoration and forest protection play an essential role in climate change mitigation."

Essentially, Falls said, his company ERA provides a "truly green climate solution" by implementing a system that generates carbon offsets through ecosystem restoration for local governments or organizations. The process, he said, combines tree planting and other land-restoration measures to increase biodiversity, remove invasive species and restore water systems without using taxpayer dollars.

ERA maintains their work is important because the United Nations estimates that deforestation accounts for about 20 per cent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions.

"The most viable way to remove large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere is through the photosynthetic action of healthy forest ecosystems," Falls said. "ERA restores degraded forests and protects them for the long term."

Falls said that after the ecosystem is restored by ERA, the local government or organization it partnered with "allows us to sell carbon removals achieved by those restorations."

"They get the restoration for free. And in return, we get the carbon rights to sell.

"We then sell them to [ethical businesses or other organizations] that want to help combat global climate change."

He said their first client was Small Potatoes Urban Delivery (SPUD), an organic grocery delivery service. "They neutralize their carbon footprints from [such things as] trucks."

Other clients include Shell Canada, Catalyst Paper and the Globe Foundation of Canada.

ERA has partnered with several municipalities and municipal organizations, including Metro Vancouver, Maple Ridge, Mission and Langley.

Falls said that ERA sold about 1,000 tons of carbon offsets in 2005, its first year of operations. That rose to 11,000 tons in 2006 and 250,000 tons in 2007.

He said they're paid between \$5 and \$20 a ton, depending on such things as market conditions.

"Obviously, we're seeing growth," added Falls. "We're looking at potential projects in Africa, South America and the U.S."

Falls said that when his company first looks at a site needing restoration, "we determine what was there historically. Then an ecologist writes a prescription to restore it to its original state."

Among other things, he said, the process involves removing invasive species and dead or dying trees.

Then clusters of trees are planted, usually Douglas fir, western red cedar, hemlock, black cottonwoods and other trees native to the area. "Then we go back and replace dead trees."

Falls said the carbon market is "an exploding market" that few understand well -- "But we do."

Falls also had a suggestion for anyone considering starting a small business: Understand your market well and stay on top of it. "Our business model has been adjusted a number of times and will be again."

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ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION ASSOCIATES INC.

Year formed: 2004

Number of employees: 29 (full and part-time)

Number of tons of carbon offsets sold in 2005: 1,000

Number of tons of carbon offsets sold in 2006: 11,000

Number of tons of carbon offsets sold in 2007: 250,000

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