

The Australian

Simple changes would capture carbon

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THE Australian landscape has the potential to store a large amount of the greenhouse gases the nation emits.

This is the potential if the government decides to include the plan in its greenhouse gas scheme.

Something as simple as changing how frequently grass is grazed, or allowing small shrubs to flourish, can increase the amount of carbon in the landscape.

Allan Dale, chief executive of Innisfail-based natural resources group Terrain, argues that paying farmers and land managers for increased carbon in grasses, small plants, shrubs and the soil would be "one of those rare win-wins in life". Terrain is a community-based body, funded by the Queensland and federal governments, industry and private companies, which runs natural resource programs in the wet tropics.

Dr Dale said increasing the amount of terrestrial carbon -- the carbon in vegetation and the soil -- would not only reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide but also improve biodiversity and the health of the environment.

Paying land managers for carbon credits would enable them to invest in the landscape.

Leonard Cohen runs Canopy, which he describes as "a not-for-profit non-government organisation that is interested in helping landholders revegetate their land using the carbon market".

He said there was huge potential to increase carbon -- and improve the finances of farmers -- in Australia's rangelands through a terrestrial carbon credit scheme. He points to vast sheep and cattle stations, where small improvements in vegetation management could have substantial results. Tony Abbott has expressed interest in counting terrestrial carbon under the opposition's direct action Package. Land managers are hoping Julia Gillard will also include terrestrial carbon in her climate change package.

"It is a mechanism that can quickly reduce greenhouse gas emissions," Dr Dale said.

The CSIRO has estimated that 164 million tonnes of greenhouse gases could be stored each year through agricultural activities such as rehabilitating grasslands, restoring soil and vegetation carbon, and reducing savanna burning. Another 853 million tonnes could be stored each year through forestry, regrowth and increasing forest biodiversity.

Last year Australia emitted an estimated 537 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. So far, terrestrial carbon has not been counted. But it could come under the new National Carbon Offset Standard, which began on July 1.