

# Protecting climate with forests

**Robert B Jackson<sup>1,13</sup>, James T Randerson<sup>2</sup>, Josep G Canadell<sup>3</sup>,  
Ray G Anderson<sup>2</sup>, Roni Avissar<sup>4</sup>, Dennis D Baldocchi<sup>5</sup>,  
Gordon B Bonan<sup>6</sup>, Ken Caldeira<sup>7</sup>, Noah S Diffenbaugh<sup>8</sup>,  
Christopher B Field<sup>7</sup>, Bruce A Hungate<sup>9</sup>, Esteban G Jobbágy<sup>10</sup>,  
Lara M Kueppers<sup>11</sup>, Marcelo D Noretto<sup>10</sup> and Diane E Pataki<sup>2,12</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Biology, Nicholas School of the Environment, and Center on Global Change, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0338, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Earth System Science, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697, USA

<sup>3</sup> Global Carbon Project, CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research, GPO Box 3023, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA

<sup>5</sup> Department of Environmental Science and Management, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

<sup>6</sup> Earth and Sun Systems Laboratory, National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, CO 80305, USA

<sup>7</sup> Department of Global Ecology, Carnegie Institution, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

<sup>8</sup> Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA

<sup>9</sup> Department of Biological Sciences and Merriam-Powell Center for Environmental Research, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA

<sup>10</sup> Grupo de Estudios Ambientales-IMASL, Universidad Nacional de San Luis and CONICET, San Luis 5700, Argentina

<sup>11</sup> School of Natural Sciences, University of California, Merced, CA 95344, USA

<sup>12</sup> Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697, USA

E-mail: [jackson@duke.edu](mailto:jackson@duke.edu)

Received 5 September 2008

Accepted for publication 21 October 2008

Published 11 November 2008

Online at [stacks.iop.org/ERL/3/044006](http://stacks.iop.org/ERL/3/044006)

## Abstract

Policies for climate mitigation on land rarely acknowledge biophysical factors, such as reflectivity, evaporation, and surface roughness. Yet such factors can alter temperatures much more than carbon sequestration does, and often in a conflicting way. We outline a framework for examining biophysical factors in mitigation policies and provide some best-practice recommendations based on that framework. Tropical projects—avoided deforestation, forest restoration, and afforestation—provide the greatest climate value, because carbon storage and biophysics align to cool the Earth. In contrast, the climate benefits of carbon storage are often counteracted in boreal and other snow-covered regions, where darker trees trap more heat than snow does. Managers can increase the climate benefit of some forest projects by using more reflective and deciduous species and through urban forestry projects that reduce energy use. Ignoring biophysical interactions could result in millions of dollars being invested in some mitigation projects that provide little climate benefit or, worse, are counter-productive.

**Keywords:** afforestation, albedo, avoided deforestation, biophysics, carbon sequestration, climate change, climate policy, forest restoration, global warming, tropical, temperate and boreal forests

<sup>13</sup> Author to whom any correspondence should be addressed.

Policies are being proposed and implemented to influence forestry and land-management practices for climate change mitigation [1, 2]. The proposed Lieberman–Warner bill, for example, establishes a US CO<sub>2</sub> market that allows corporations to offset up to 30% of their emissions through forestry and land-management activities. Many countries are already using forestry credits in voluntary carbon markets trading billions of dollars each year. Forest conservation will also likely play an important role in the second commitment of the Kyoto Protocol.

Planting forests and avoiding deforestation can help to slow increases in CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations and global temperatures. However, in addition to altering the carbon balance and emissions of other greenhouse gases, forest projects come with an additional suite of biophysical changes (figures 1(A) and (B)). They often darken the land surface compared to pastures, agricultural lands, and snow-covered surfaces (figures 1(A)–(C)). This effect leads to higher sunlight absorption that can warm the land regionally. Other biophysical changes alter the amount of water that evaporates from plants and the soil, the roughness or unevenness of the vegetation canopy, and the production of convective clouds and rainfall (figures 1(A) and (B)). Overall, such biophysical changes can affect local to regional climate much more than the accompanying carbon sequestration does—and sometimes in a conflicting way [3–7].

Unlike reducing fossil fuel combustion, where the effect on greenhouse gas emissions is dominant, the net climate impact of a forest has dimensions beyond carbon storage alone. For forests, which mitigation activities will have biophysical changes that reinforce or negate the benefits of carbon sequestration? What if a forest offset activity cools the Earth globally but warms it locally—or alters the regional hydrologic balance—exacerbating the regional impacts of climate change? This paper outlines a framework for examining such interactions and provides some recommendations based on that framework.

Biophysical influences on air temperature depend on where sequestration activities occur. In the tropics, forests cool regionally by increasing the evaporation of water from land to air (figures 1(A) and (B)). This added water vapor can help to form clouds that contribute to additional cooling by reflecting sunlight back to space [3, 8–11]. In this case the biophysics and carbon sequestration of forest cover change are usually aligned; the best science indicates that avoided deforestation and forest establishment in the tropics cools the climate through evapotranspiration, cloud feedbacks, and slowing the buildup of CO<sub>2</sub> in air.

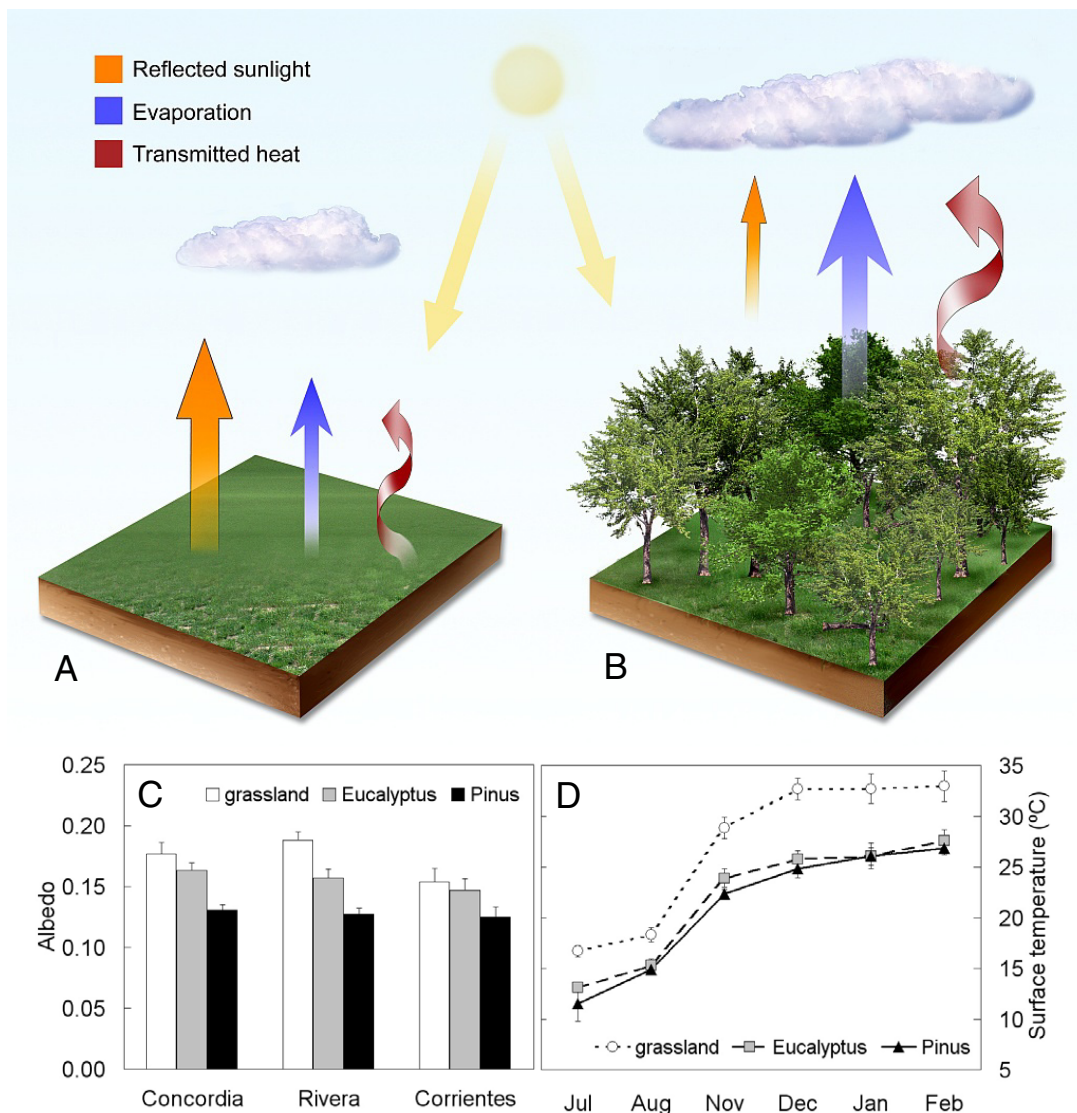
Boreal forests provide a different extreme. Rates of carbon storage there are much slower than in the tropics because of colder temperatures, less sunlight, and other factors that limit tree growth. Boreal lands are also covered in snow and ice for extended periods each year. Replacing snow with a surface that absorbs more sunlight, such as an evergreen spruce or pine canopy, warms the area at spatial scales of hundreds or even thousands of kilometers [12, 13]. As a result, planting forests in northern countries will help to stabilize global atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> but may accelerate climate warming regionally, further speeding the loss of snow and ice cover.

The greatest uncertainties lie in temperate forests [6, 14]. While their rates of carbon sequestration are well established, much less is known about how accompanying biophysical changes influence climate. A number of climate model studies suggest that replacing forests with agriculture or grasslands in temperate regions cools surface air temperatures [14–17]. Other studies show the opposite—that temperate forests cool the air compared with grasslands and croplands [18–20]. In warm-temperate areas, such as the southeastern US or northern Argentina, surface temperatures of forests are often 1–5 °C cooler than adjacent grasslands or croplands (figure 1(D)). This local cooling is caused by more evapotranspiration and a more efficient coupling between the land and the atmosphere in forests attributable to increased roughness. Paradoxically, these forests also deliver more heat to the atmosphere because they are darker and absorb more sunlight (figure 2). The fate of this added heat within the atmosphere—both in the form of air temperatures and water vapor—is poorly understood. In some temperate and tropical regions additional water vapor may form clouds that contribute to surface cooling and increased rainfall in nearby areas. In other regions where water availability is relatively scarce, such as the southwestern US, forest plantations may warm regional climate by absorbing more sunlight without substantially increasing evapotranspiration.

While the science of biophysical interactions is still emerging, some recommendations for best practices in climate protection are possible. Based on decades of research in carbon sequestration and biophysics, we suggest that avoided deforestation, forest restoration, and afforestation in the tropics provide the greatest value for slowing climate change. Tropical forests combine rapid rates of carbon storage with biophysical effects that are beneficial in many settings, including greater convective rainfall [8–11]. Forestry projects in warm-temperate regions, such as the southeastern US, can also help reduce warming, but large uncertainties remain for the net climate effects of forestry projects in temperate regions. Forestry projects in boreal systems are less likely to provide climate cooling at local to global scales because of the strong snow-cover feedback [5, 12, 13]. Thus, incentives for reforesting boreal systems should be preceded by thorough analyses of the true cooling potential before being included in climate policies.

Policies could also be crafted to provide incentives for beneficial management practices. For instance, urban forestry provides the opportunity to reduce energy use directly; in temperate regions deciduous trees block sunlight in summer, reducing the energy needed to cool buildings, but they allow sunlight to warm buildings in winter. In addition to choosing appropriate deciduous species, foresters could also select trees that are ‘brighter’, such as poplars, with albedos relatively close to those of the grasses or crops they replace (figure 2). Additionally, forest planting and restoration can be used to reclaim damaged lands, reducing erosion and stabilizing streambanks [23].

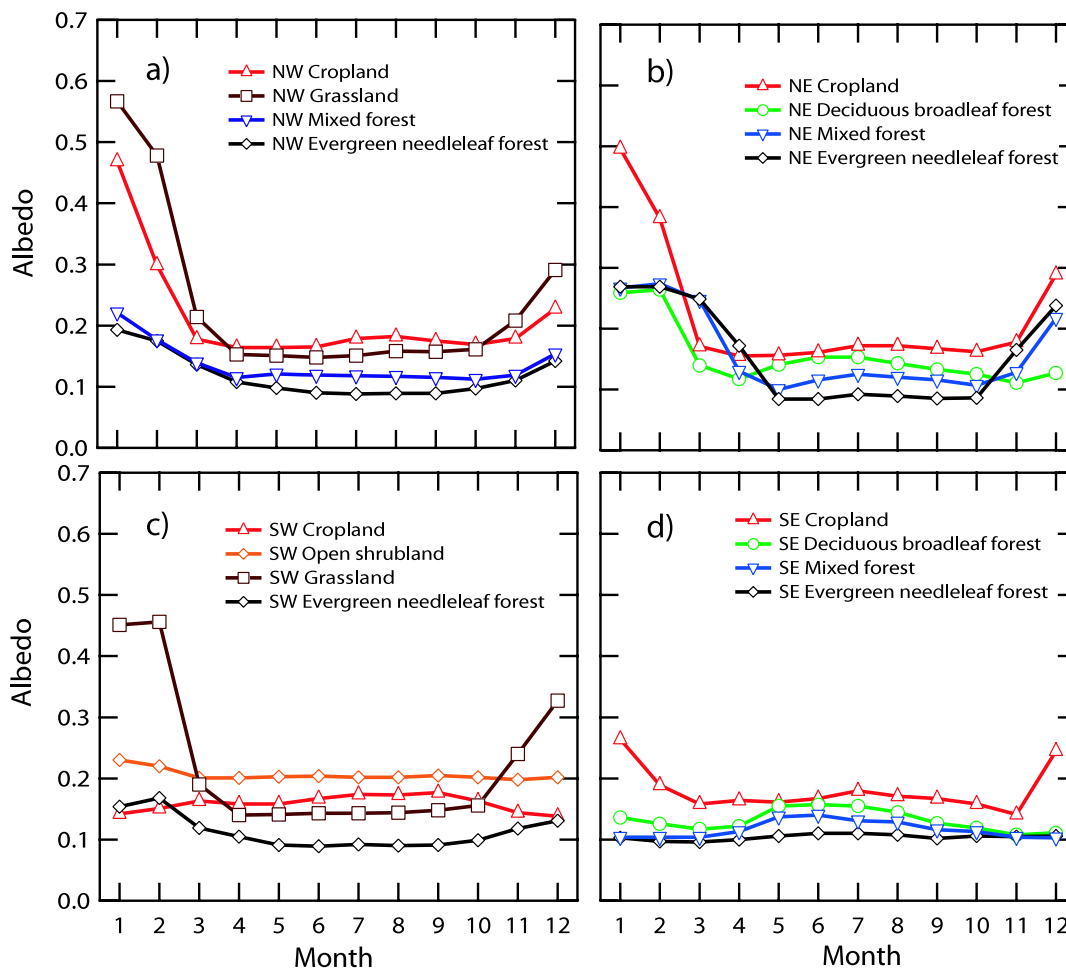
However, some trade-offs and unintended consequences are possible when forests are included in climate policies. Eucalypts, for instance, grow quickly and have a fairly bright



**Figure 1.** Examples of various biophysical factors in a grassland or cropland (A) and forest (B). Because of a grassland or cropland’s higher reflectivity (albedo), it typically reflects more sunlight than the forest does, cooling surface air temperatures relatively more. In contrast, the forest often evaporates more water and transmits more heat to the atmosphere (latent and sensible heat, respectively), cooling it locally compared to the grassland or unirrigated cropland. More water vapor in the atmosphere can lead to a greater number and height of clouds as well as to increased convective rainfall. In addition, the forest has a more uneven canopy (surface roughness) that increases mixing and upwelling of air. ((C) and (D)) Comparison of shortwave albedo and surface skin temperature for 215 grassland and forest stands across Argentina and Uruguay. The satellite data were assessed using 180 km × 180 km Landsat images (2000–2005) on seven dates for the Corrientes and Concordia regions of Argentina and three dates for the Rivera region of Uruguay. The Landsat scenes were geometrically and atmospherically corrected and correspond to images 226/80 (path and row) for Corrientes, 225/82 for Concordia, and 223/82 for Rivera. In general, measurements at sites within a region compared adjacent grassland, pine, and eucalypt stands.

albedo, but they are fire-prone [24] and often use more water than native vegetation [19]. Because forestry projects can appropriate scarce water resources, they may be poor choices in semi-arid regions [19, 25]. Applying fertilizers in forest sequestration projects helps trees grow more quickly but also increases the emissions of nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas [26]. Finally and perhaps most importantly, forests provide a wide range of important services, including preserving biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and freshwater supply. Policies focused solely on managing vegetation to cool local or global temperatures may jeopardize other key ecosystem services.

In the coming decades, policies for forest carbon sequestration and offset activities will create a multi-billion-dollar industry. The biophysical consequences of forest cover change and other co-effects of these activities can be large at regional scales [27, 28] and may sometimes reduce or even cancel the benefits of carbon sequestration. Biophysical interactions should therefore be factored into climate mitigation strategy in at least two ways—in designing carbon sequestration projects to achieve the greatest climate benefit and in comparing the costs and benefits of terrestrial carbon sequestration with those of other mitigation activities. Successful policy should account for the different ways that



**Figure 2.** Satellite observations of monthly shortwave surface albedo for dominant US land cover types in the Northwest (a), Northeast (b), Southwest (c), and Southeast (d). In all regions, albedo in croplands is substantially higher than in nearby forests. In the Northeast and Southeast, deciduous broadleaf forests have higher albedo values than evergreen needleleaf forests during summer. The data from 2004 were obtained from MODerate resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) measurements of black sky albedo (MCD43C3 version 5) [21]. The albedo observations were averaged within International Geosphere-Biosphere Program (IGBP) land cover classes (MOD12C1 version 4) developed using concurrent MODIS surface reflectance observations [22]. All  $0.05^\circ \times 0.05^\circ$  grid cells comprised of  $>80\%$  of a single IGBP land cover type were included in the analysis. The borders of the four regions were:  $40^\circ\text{N}$  to  $50^\circ\text{N}$  and west of  $105^\circ\text{W}$  for the Northwest,  $40^\circ\text{N}$  to  $50^\circ\text{N}$  and east of  $90^\circ\text{W}$  for the Northeast,  $30^\circ\text{N}$  to  $40^\circ\text{N}$  and west of  $105^\circ\text{W}$  for the Southwest, and  $30^\circ\text{N}$  to  $40^\circ\text{N}$  and east of  $90^\circ\text{W}$  for the Southeast.

forests interact with climate. It also needs to acknowledge factors beyond climate science, including trade-offs with other ecosystem services and the demand for and economics of land use.

Currently, no formal mechanism accounts for biophysics in climate policy. Adding biophysical effects into frameworks for evaluating carbon sequestration programs is a challenge, but simple rules (or mechanisms to adjust carbon prices) can be developed to encourage best practices. Ignoring this challenge could result in millions of dollars invested in some mitigation projects that provide little climate benefit or, worse, are counter-productive.

**Acknowledgments**

We thank W Chameides and G Katul for helpful suggestions on the manuscript. Financial support came from the National

Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, DOE’s National Institute for Climatic Change Research, and Duke University’s Center on Global Change. This paper is a contribution to ‘Managing the Carbon Cycle’ (Theme 3) of the Global Carbon Project, a joint project of the Earth System Science Partnership.

**References**

- [1] Pacala S and Socolow R 2004 Stabilization wedges: solving the climate problem for the next 50 years with current technologies *Science* **305** 968–72
- [2] Raupach M R, Marland G, Ciais P, Le Quééré C, Canadell J G, Klepper G and Field C B 2007 Global and regional drivers of accelerating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **104** 18866–70
- [3] Pielke R A Sr and Avissar R 1990 Influence of landscape structure on local and regional climate *Landscape Ecol.* **4** 133–56

- [4] Marland G *et al* 2003 The climatic impacts of land surface change and carbon management, and the implications for climate-change mitigation policy *Clim. Policy* **3** 149–57
- [5] McGuire A D, Chapin F S, Walsh J E and Wirth C 2006 Integrated regional changes in arctic climate feedbacks: implications for the global climate system *Annu. Rev. Environ. Res.* **31** 61–91
- [6] Field C B, Lobell D B, Peters H A and Chiariello N R 2007 Feedbacks of terrestrial ecosystems to climate change *Annu. Rev. Environ. Res.* **32** 1–29
- [7] Betts R 2007 Implications of land ecosystem-atmosphere interactions for strategies for climate change adaptation and mitigation *Tellus B* **59** 602–15
- [8] Lean J and Warrilow D A 1989 Simulation of the regional climatic impact of Amazon deforestation *Nature* **342** 411–3
- [9] Shukla J, Nobre C and Sellers P 1990 Amazon deforestation and climate change *Science* **247** 1322–5
- [10] Dickinson R E and Kennedy P 1992 Impacts on regional climate of Amazon deforestation *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **19** 1947–50
- [11] Hoffmann W A and Jackson R B 2000 Vegetation–climate feedbacks in the conversion of tropical savanna to grassland *J. Clim.* **13** 1593–602
- [12] Betts R A 2000 Offset of the potential carbon sink from boreal forestation by decreases in surface albedo *Nature* **408** 187–90
- [13] Randerson J T *et al* 2006 The impact of boreal forest fire on climate warming *Science* **314** 1130–2
- [14] Bala G, Caldeira K, Wickett M, Phillips T J, Lobell D B, Delire C and Mirin A 2007 Combined climate and carbon-cycle effects of large-scale deforestation *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **104** 6550–5
- [15] Diffenbaugh N S and Sloan L C 2002 Global climate sensitivity to land surface change: the mid Holocene revisited *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **29** 1476
- [16] Oleson K W, Bonan G B, Levis S and Vertenstein M 2004 Effects of land use change on North American climate: impact of surface datasets and model biogeophysics *Clim. Dyn.* **23** 117–32
- [17] Schaeffer M, Eickhout B, Hoogwijk M, Strengers B, van Vuuren D, Leemans R and Opsteegh T 2006 CO<sub>2</sub> and albedo climate impacts of extratropical carbon and biomass plantations *Global Biogeochem. Cycles* **20** GB2020
- [18] DeFries R S, Bounoua L and Collatz G J 2002 Human modification of the landscape and surface climate in the next fifty years *Global Change Biol.* **8** 438–58
- [19] Jackson R B, Jobbágy E G, Avissar R, Baidya Roy S, Barrett D, Cook C W, Farley K A, le Maitre D C, McCarl B A and Murray B C 2005 Trading water for carbon with biological carbon sequestration *Science* **310** 1944–7
- [20] Juang J-Y, Katul G, Siqueira M, Stoy P and Novick K 2007 Separating the effects of albedo from ecophysiological changes on surface temperature along a successional chronosequence in the southeastern United States *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **34** L21408
- [21] Schaaf C B *et al* 2002 First operational BRDF, albedo nadir reflectance products from MODIS *Remote Sens. Environ.* **83** 135–48
- [22] Friedl M A *et al* 2002 Global land cover mapping from MODIS: algorithms and early results *Remote Sens. Environ.* **83** 287–302
- [23] Plantinga A J and Wu J J 2003 Co-benefits from carbon sequestration in forests: evaluating reductions in agricultural externalities from an afforestation policy in Wisconsin *Land Econ.* **79** 74–85
- [24] Ward D J, Lamont B B and Burrows C L 2001 Grassfires reveal contrasting fire regimes in eucalypt forest before and after European settlement of southwestern Australia *Forest. Ecol. Manag.* **150** 323–9
- [25] Hurteau M D, Koch G W and Hungate B A 2008 Carbon protection and fire risk reduction: toward a full accounting of forest carbon offsets *Front. Ecol. Environ.* **6** 493–8
- [26] Crutzen P J, Mosier A R, Smith K A and Winiwarter W 2007 N<sub>2</sub>O releases from agro-biofuel production negates global warming reduction by replacing fossil fuels *Atmos. Chem. Phys. Discuss.* **7** 11191–205
- [27] Chapin F S III, Randerson J T, McGuire A D, Foley J A and Field C B 2008 Changing feedbacks in the climate–biosphere system *Front. Ecol. Environ.* **6** 313–32
- [28] Bonan G B 2008 Forests and climate change: forcings, feedbacks, and the climate benefits of forests *Science* **320** 1444–9