

Done dirt, cheap

A COALITION government would put its faith in soil carbon sequestration – as long as it remained cheap.

At a community forum in Woorndoo last Friday, Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment, and Heritage Greg Hunt said government abatements for soil carbon were the keystone of a low cost emissions scheme.

Mr Hunt said under the Liberal Party's direct action plan, a Coalition government would "purchase the lowest cost emissions reductions."

According to Mr Hunt, the race to the bottom for emissions cuts would also apply to soil carbon abatements. "It would be judged by the market. We'll be looking for the lowest cost abatement," he said.

A Coalition government would pay for up to 85 million tonnes of soil-sequestered carbon per annum through an Emissions Reduction Fund.

Mr Hunt said a Coalition government would put \$3.2 billion over four years into cutting emissions, with a claimed \$50 billion in budgetary savings.

He also described the Direct Action Plan as a "no regrets" policy that would not tie Australia's economy to emissions cuts to the extent of the Carbon Tax.

As well as paying the smallest amount possible, he also suggested reward was not the main factor for many farmers sequestering carbon.

"A lot of farmers are doing it for free," Mr Hunt said. "I won't predict what the market will deliver. The market could do 1-2 million tonnes for under \$10.00 a tonne."

According to Professor Alex McBratney, director of the Australian Centre for Precision Agriculture at the University of Sydney, farmers would need a higher abatement as an incentive to practice carbon sequestration.

"If you calculate the cost to produce one tonne of carbon through nitrate fertilizer, which is \$200/tonne, \$30/tonne (for carbon) is closer to the mark," he said.

"I don't think a lower abatement price will be effective in any instance. In the end I personally believe in the market."

Prof McBratney said he believed a market-based scheme was superior to both the Coalition's Direct Action policy and the proposed Carbon Tax.

He also said farmers were concerned by a potential 100-year caveat that would lock their land into an abatement agreement beyond their lifetime.

Mr Hunt said as the cheapest and most accessible

carbon storing method, soil carbon sequestration would account for "little more than half" of Australia's emission cuts by 2020 under the Direct Action Plan.

Both the Liberal and Labor parties advocate a five per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2020.

Prof McBratney believes even in a best-case scenario, soil carbon sequestration could not account for a 50 per cent of emissions reductions.

"I think if everyone was involved in sequestration, we could be offsetting 10 to 30 per cent of emissions. That's a lot of effort in that," he said.

However, the cost of comprehensively testing soil carbon levels is prohibitive.

Prof McBratney said costs of obtaining soil carbon data were set to come down with new methods, including one in development at the University of Sydney that would have an initial cost of \$5000.

While the costs of sequestration might be set to decrease, time will tell if the Coalition's plan for a low cost abatement scheme will tempt farmers.

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