A seven-year study by Professor Robert Van Pelt and colleagues at Humboldt State University affirms the importance of old-growth trees as "carbon sinks".

As the Mercury News recently reported, the scientists found that California's old growth redwood trees have an extraordinary capacity to sequester large amounts of carbon dioxide, and thus to literally cleanse the air of a greenhouse gas that contributes significantly to global warming.

Without intending to do so, perhaps, the Humboldt scientists have contributed to resolution of a roiling debate over the use of proceeds from California's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.

The fund was established by AB 32, the landmark Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. Proceeds from the auction of cap and trade "allowances", which so far has exceeded $2.6 billion, are required to be spent on "programs and projects that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the State and also deliver major economic, environmental and public health benefits for Californians...".

Despite this directive, Gov. Jerry Brown proposed to include in his budget for FY 2016-2017 an expenditure of $3.09 billion for projects without apparent regard for their cost-effectiveness in reducing emissions or sequestering carbon. Most surprising, the governor proposed to spend only $180 million on "Healthy Forests" and "Urban Forestry", the bulk of which was to be used by CAL FIRE to fund 30 new positions.

Not a single dollar was to be used for the permanent protection of the old growth forests which have been identified by Van Pelt as contributing so effectively to carbon sequestration.

Members of the Legislature expressed concern that the governor's proposal had been developed without regard for the cost-effectiveness. When the administration released its 2016 report on the expenditure of Cap and Trade Auction Proceeds, it failed to address critics' concerns about the absence of cost-effectiveness criteria for the selection of greenhouse gas reduction projects.

The Legislature then turned to its Legislative Analyst's Office for an independent evaluation of costs and benefits. Its April report evaluated 21 greenhouse gas project categories and confirmed that the most effective programs have been the least well-funded.

Forest health and Forest Legacy projects, for instance, achieved a "cost per ton of (carbon) reduction" of $4 and $10, respectively. LAO cautioned that if projects cannot be relied upon for
emissions reductions, the Legislature might instead be required to achieve its goals through additional regulatory mandates.

Unable to find common ground on which projects to fund, the Legislature passed and the governor signed the budget with NO provision for expenditure of greenhouse gas reduction funds. The governor has indicated a willingness to relent, however, if--before Aug. 31--the Legislature extends the AB 32 program beyond 2020, as he has proposed, and adopts new, more aggressive emissions targets for 2030.

In its draft Climate Change Scoping Plan for the 2030 increment, the Air Resources Board acknowledges the implications of Van Pelt's research: "We have to start investing now in strategies to ensure that these (natural and working) lands are managed in ways that maximize their carbon benefits...".

Prior to adjournment on Aug. 31, the governor and the Legislature have an opportunity to heed this urgent advice and to restore funding for cost-effective forestry projects that truly meet the mandate of AB 32.

Doug Wheeler was California Secretary for Natural Resources from 1991-1999. He is now a partner in the environmental practice of Hogan Lovells US LLP, and an advisor to the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment and the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke. He wrote this for the Mercury News.