Beyond Payments: Voluntary Forest Conservation by Small Farmers in Mexico

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Abstract

Conversion of forests to cropland and pasture in the tropics is a leading driver of loss of local, regional, and global environmental services. Extensive research and conservation programs targeting farmers responsible for deforestation have had mixed results over the last two decades. Fewer efforts have been made to understand the motivations behind farmers’ forest conservation decisions and to reinforce farmers’ willingness to conserve their forest. This paper examines the voluntary conservation of forest reserves by small farmers in the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, the largest remaining forest in Mexico and part of Mesoamerican biodiversity hotspot. The paper analyzes socioeconomic, institutional and governance factors at the household, community and biosphere reserve level in explaining farmer choices. The analysis is based on a survey of 232 households from 30 communities, information provided by key governmental and non-governmental organizations associated with the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, and participant-observation in the communities and the biosphere reserve. The findings indicate farmers’ conservation efforts depend on their ability to conserve (e.g. alternative sources of income, social welfare aid and land availability). The case of Calakmul illustrates the importance of community institutions and farmers’ access to decision-making in enhancing farmers’ willingness to conserve voluntarily without receiving a payment in exchange. This paper shows that farmers’ decisions to conserve are influenced by more than just financial incentives.

Keywords: Conservation, land use change, forest, governance, institutions, payments, cash transfers

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