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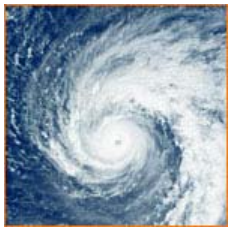

People look to agriculture as a way to soak up greenhouse gases, but a scientist says that idea might not work all that well.

By Kathleen Schmitt

Scientists believe the atmosphere is getting warmer because we've added so many greenhouse gases to it by burning fossil fuels. People around the world say we need to deal with global warming by cutting emissions of carbon dioxide -- the most common greenhouse gas. But some U.S. policymakers say the United States should receive credit for all of the CO2 that's absorbed by American agriculture -- by the crops and by the land itself.

Scientists have long known that farm crops and some types of soil absorb carbon dioxide. But a study published in the journal "Science" shows that farmland also releases a greenhouse gas. It's nitrous oxide -- and the study says its impact needs to be considered in plans to curb global warming.

One author of the study is Phil Robertson, a professor of ecosystem science at Michigan State University. Robertson says cropland releases only trace amounts of nitrous oxide. But the gas is 300 times stronger than CO2 as a greenhouse gas pollutant. So Robertson says when it comes to agriculture and greenhouses gases, the effect of those that are released is almost as strong as that of the gases that are soaked up.

Robertson hopes these findings will get people to look at the relationship between agriculture and global warming in all its complexity.

> *"I think one of the most significant outcomes of the study will be to enlarge the carbon credit discussion from simply a 'stored soil carbon' focus to a broader focus on all sources of global warming potential in cropping systems."*

Robertson says the nitrous oxide released by farming comes from soil bacteria that feed on nitrogen in fertilizer. He says using less fertilizer could help reduce those emissions.

Script for Wednesday, November 15, 2000