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Carbon Sequestration Offsets Generated Through the Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) generates valuable environmental benefits on American farm and ranch lands. These benefits include protection and restoration of wildlife habitat, improvements in local air and water quality, and enhancements of other important aspects of environmental health. CRP-funded activities, such as planting of trees and grasses, also often generate sequestered carbon.

Although we find this carbon sequestration to be an important atmospheric benefit, we find that carbon sequestration taking place on CRP-enrolled lands is not “additional¹,” that is, we find that carbon sequestration on CRP-enrolled lands is occurring and will continue to occur whether or not landowners receive compensation on top of CRP payments. Also, we are aware that the U.S. claims carbon reductions from CRP land in its net greenhouse gas emissions inventory (U.S. Climate Action Report, 2002). Thus, on a project-by project basis *and* program-wide, carbon sequestration on lands actively enrolled in CRP fails to produce any new greenhouse gas benefits.

The integrity of a market-based incentive depends upon the notion that the market incentive will generate environmental benefits that would not have otherwise existed. In the case of carbon sequestration, a payment for sequestered carbon should reward landowners who would not otherwise undertake carbon-sequestering practices

In the context of the CRP, this case is very difficult to make. The CRP is a popular program that is in high demand, and there is little reason to believe that the program as a whole will not continue to see the full enrollment it has seen in the past. As such, the CRP has been generating carbon sequestration benefits over time, without any “carbon payment” to landowners, and there is little reason to believe that this trend will change in the future. For these reasons we believe that in the revised 1605b program, the carbon sequestered in any project on CRP-enrolled lands should NOT be considered “additional”. Furthermore, project submitters should be required to indicate CRP-enrollment in 1605b reports.

While carbon sequestration occurring on land actively enrolled in CRP should not be considered “additional”, we believe that “additional” carbon sequestration could occur on land formerly enrolled in CRP. Such a project should be held to the same standards of quality and credibility as projects on private lands never enrolled in CRP. Accordingly, a project on lands formerly enrolled in CRP must be evaluated against--and meet--the same measurement and accounting standards as any other project on private lands.

¹ In the context of carbon sequestration projects (and other greenhouse gas reduction projects), the term “additional” refers to the carbon sequestration that occurs in addition to what would have occurred in the absence of the project. In other words, “additional carbon” sequestration is that which occurs above and beyond the business-as-usual scenario.