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California forest standard goes national

A new standard for the verification of forest carbon projects across the United States passed its final hurdle yesterday, paving the way for an expansion of forest protection activity across the country. It should also increase the credibility of US forest-based carbon credits in the voluntary carbon market, although it has not received universal endorsement among environmental groups.

The board of the California-based Climate Action Reserve (CAR) voted for the final adoption of Version 3.0 of its Forest Project Protocol, which extends the applicability of the well-regarded standard nationally from its original state focus.

The new protocol offers forest project developers independent verification of carbon sequestration in their projects. It covers activities targeting avoided conversion of forest land to other uses, improved forest management and reforestation of previously-cleared land. Unlike other standards, it also goes as far as requiring sustainable harvest operators to account for what happens to the carbon in harvested wood products.

CAR and its predecessor, CCAR, offer what are regarded as the quality standards in the fast-growing US voluntary carbon market. This has been recognised by Congress in the drafting emerging cap and trade laws, now being considered in the Senate. CAR's status as the official carbon offset standard used by the California state government has earned it acceptance in the House's Waxman-Markey emissions trading bill, the American Clean Energy and Security Act.

The national application of the California standard should help boost the environmental integrity of forest carbon credits in the United States. Up to now, the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX) voluntary carbon trading regime has been the main market opportunity for forest owners to pursue carbon credits for preserving or sustainably managing their trees.

Concerns over weak additionality and permanence rules, however, have hung over the CCX offsets program – requiring, for example, forest owners to commit their land to forest cover for as little as 15 years. The CAR protocol requires a commitment to forest cover for much longer, typically 100 years and more.

The protection and regeneration of forests worldwide is vital to efforts to combat climate change. Yet more than half of the 750 million acres of US forest land is in private ownership, the American Forest Foundation says. With a cap and trade scheme looming, this means rigorous standards like CAR are required to ensure their conservation and the integrity of forest carbon activity.

However, CAR has drawn criticism from the Pacific Forest Trust over one aspect of the protocol. The environmental NGO says the final version weakens protections for mature forests. PFT says the baseline measurement for avoided conversion projects is set too high, reducing the volume of carbon credits paid for carbon-rich forest well above that benchmark, and therefore reducing the financial incentives for owners to conserve such stands.