Conservation Partnership Celebrates First-of-a-Kind Carbon Offset Methodology and Innovative Prairie Preservation Project

Economic incentives protect traditional rural livelihoods, critical habitat and reduce greenhouse gas emissions

WASHINGTON, D.C., October 30, 2013 - The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), along with project partners Ducks Unlimited (DU), The Climate Trust (TCT) and The Nature Conservancy, today announced positive results from their joint collaboration — an innovative Avoided Grassland Conversion carbon project. The project is one of nine groundbreaking climate change initiatives selected and funded by the NRCS's 2011 Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program, and is focused on greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation for one of the least protected and most imperiled ecosystems in the world.

The grassland and wetlands of North America not only provide vital habitat for a host of wildlife, including migratory birds, but also a rich and resilient forage for livestock, and a significant carbon sink if left uncultivated. Unfortunately, pressures to convert native prairie are intensifying with high commodity prices. In addition, new farming technologies make crop production possible on lands once considered unsuitable.

The first outcome of this project is a collaborative effort between DU and NRCS that is preserving the soil carbon sequestered in the North Dakota counties of Burleigh, Emmons, Kidder, Sheridan, McLean, Stutsman, Logan and McIntosh by avoiding the conversion of these valuable prairies to cropland. This area is part of the Missouri Coteau region, a vast region of grasslands and wetlands that stretches across North Dakota and South Dakota and benefits livestock and wildlife.

Carbon that is otherwise sequestered, or trapped long term in the soil, is released to the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide when soils are tilled or disturbed. Under the leadership of Ducks Unlimited, the project successfully enrolled 114 eligible landowners and 50,000 acres in this cutting-edge program, and worked with partners to create an environmentally robust accounting methodology to quantify the carbon that remains in the soil as carbon offset credits.

Newly approved by the American Carbon Registry (ACR) and co-authored by project partners DU, TCT, The Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund and Terra Global Capital, the *Avoided Conversion of Grasslands and Shrublands (ACoGS)* carbon offset methodology is the first of its kind and provides real opportunities for achieving a meaningful level of emissions reductions in the agriculture sector. In practice, the ACoGS methodology will enable grassland-based agricultural producers to earn income from the sale of carbon credits generated through the preservation of their grasslands.

“This project provides Northern Great Plains producers with new ways to earn income from conservation activities, expanded opportunity for outdoor recreation and an opportunity to create jobs in their communities,” said Robert Bonnie, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and the Environment. “The American Carbon Registry’s approval of this innovative ACoGS protocol enables vital projects like our partnership with Ducks Unlimited to preserve a treasured national landscape, while also preventing the release of greenhouse gas emissions.”

“Rural communities will not only benefit from project payments, but could also see economic benefits from outdoor recreation opportunities on grasslands, attracting hunters, photographers, and other nature enthusiasts from across the country,” said Steve Adair, Director of DU’s Great Plains Region. “Research has shown the economic benefit of wildlife provided from grasslands is estimated at $63 per acre. This equates to money-in-hand for these rural populations.”

“What’s great about this project is that it opens new opportunities to compensate ranchers for continuing to produce the benefits they have historically provided – the conservation of our grasslands for the benefit of people and wildlife - that are now at risk from rangeland conversion,” said Joe Fargione, The Nature Conservancy's Director of Science for North America.

Agriculture accounts for approximately 8 percent of total U.S. GHG emissions—while agriculture’s emissions have increased 11.5 percent since 1990. Specifically, more than 750,000 acres of native grassland were converted to cropland from 1997 to 2007. In the Prairie Pothole Region of Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota, annual losses of native grasslands have averaged approximately 50,000 acres per year since 2007, leading to a significant loss of soil carbon, and emitting 20-75 $MTCO_2e$/acre. Final project benefits are estimated to perpetually conserve 5,000-6,000 acres of native mixed-grass prairie. The protection of grasslands will also indirectly protect 500-600 acres of seasonal and semi-permanent wetlands situated in the protected grasslands.

“In addition to the significant GHG emissions reductions achieved by this project, carbon financing allows local ranch families to maintain their traditional livelihood of cattle grazing by providing economic incentives,” said Dick Kempka, Vice President of Business Development for The Climate Trust. “The project also generates significant environmental co-benefits by enhancing water retention, air quality and soil quality, in addition to preserving habitat for at least four endangered species that call the grasslands home.”

The process of developing, planning and implementing the USDA CIG climate change initiatives has played a key role in helping to inform ongoing development of agricultural offset protocols with a national impact. “This offset protocol will allow farmers and ranchers from across the United States to earn revenue for conservation practices from emerging environmental markets such as California’s carbon market,” said Robert Parkhurst, Director of Agriculture Greenhouse Gas Markets at Environmental Defense Fund. These projects have served as pilots, providing a bridge to carbon offset markets and the potential role of agricultural projects within these markets.

The DU-led prairie preservation effort is a primary example of how collaborations of this nature can accomplish a great deal by everyone doing their part to reach mutually beneficial goals.

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About The Partners

Originally established by Congress in 1935 as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** has expanded to become a conservation leader for all natural resources, ensuring private lands are conserved, restored, and more resilient to environmental challenges, like climate change. Seventy percent of the land in the United States is privately owned, making stewardship by private landowners absolutely critical to the health of our Nation's environment. NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems. www.usda.nrcs.gov

Ducks Unlimited Inc. is the world's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving North America's continually disappearing waterfowl habitats. Established in 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 13 million acres thanks to contributions from more than a million supporters across the continent. Guided by science and dedicated to program efficiency, DU works toward the vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever. For more information on our work, visit www.ducks.org . Connect with us on our Facebook page at facebook.com/DucksUnlimited, follow our tweets at twitter.com/DucksUnlimited and watch DU videos at youtube.com/DucksUnlimited Inc.

The Climate Trust is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with over 16 years of carbon financing experience. Our mission is to provide expertise, financing, and inspiration to accelerate innovative climate solutions that endure. In order to arrest the rise in greenhouse gas emissions and to avoid the most dangerous impacts of climate change, The Climate Trust works to accelerate project implementation, develop financing solutions, and establish a supportive policy environment in the renewable energy, agriculture, forestry and energy efficiency sectors. Additional information at www.climatetrust.org | @ClimateTrust | facebook.com/TheClimateTrust

The **American Carbon Registry**, (ACR), an enterprise of Winrock International, is a leading nonprofit carbon offset program recognized for its strong standards for environmental integrity. Founded in 1996 as the first private greenhouse gas registry in the world, ACR has over 18 years of unparalleled experience in the voluntary carbon market. In addition, ACR is an approved Offset Project Registry (OPR) for the California Cap-and-Trade Program. In this role, ACR works with the state regulatory agency to oversee the registration and issuance of Offset Credits, which can be converted to compliance credits and used by California entities to help meet their emissions reductions obligations. Visit www.americancarbonregistry.org.

The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. The Conservancy and its more than one million members have protected nearly 120 million acres worldwide. Visit The Nature Conservancy on the Web at www.nature.org.

Environmental Defense Fund is a national environmental organization working to preserve the natural systems on which all life depends, focusing on the most critical environmental problems. Our working lands team is creating conservation incentives that work for people wildlife and the economy. Visit www.edf.org

Terra Global Capital, LLC was founded in 2006 to facilitate market and payment-for-performance based approaches for forest and land-use emission reductions that provide community benefits. Terra is now the leader in forest and land-use analytics and finance, providing technical expertise and investment capital to their global client base in a collaborative and innovative manner. As a group, Terra has more global experience in the land-use sector than any other entity and is committed to working with its local partners to build capacity and support local communities and governments to sustainably manage their land. Terra has extensive developing country experience and is the leading developer of protocols to measure GHG emissions reductions from a full range of agricultural activities in the United States. www.terraglobalcapital.com Tel: (1) 415 215 5941