

Briefing

Woodland Carbon Code

Background

The Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) is a voluntary code of good practice for UK-based forest carbon sequestration projects. The code encourages a consistent approach to woodland carbon projects, and offers clarity and transparency to customers about the carbon savings that their contributions may realistically achieve. The WCC was developed in response to a lack of confidence in forest carbon projects as a result of the variable quality of projects in the past and the resulting negative treatment by the media. It sets out robust requirements for voluntary carbon sequestration projects that incorporate core principles of good carbon management as part of modern sustainable forest management. Specific objectives of the Code include:

- ensuring high standards of sustainable forest management in line with the UK Forestry Standard and Climate Change Guidelines for forestry);
- setting out requirements of good practice in terms of both carbon (emissions reduction) and sustainable forest management;
- providing access to forest carbon measurement protocols that enable consistent and rigorous measurement of carbon uptake in woodlands and;
- establishing a system of independent quality assurance through the introduction of procedures for registering, validating and verifying woodland carbon projects.

The WCC has been developed by an FC Steering Group supported by an independent Carbon Advisory Group and a draft Code was consulted on in autumn 2009. The UK Low Carbon Transition Plan, published by the previous administration in July 2009, noted the critical role of the Code of Good Practice for Forest Carbon Projects (i.e. WCC) in increasing confidence in woodland creation as a reliable way to remove and store carbon. The WCC has strong support from the Coalition Government, and the publication of the Code in its final version was trailed in the Draft Carbon Plan, published in March 2011.

A pilot phase for the WCC began in September 2010 and is nearing completion. The pilot phase has involved the UK Accreditation Service working with two certification bodies (SGS and SFQA) to develop a process for third party certification to the WCC. Project documentation has been completed for 14 out of 15 pilot phase projects, with verification likely to be complete by the end of June 2011. It is planned to publish the final version of the Woodland Carbon Code in July 2011.

To meet the requirements of the code, projects must:

- register with the Forestry Commission, stating the exact location and long-term objectives of their project;
- meet national forestry standards to ensure they are sustainably and responsibly managed (i.e. UKFS as a minimum)
- have a long-term management plan;
- use standard methods for estimating the carbon that will be sequestered;
- demonstrate that the project delivers additional carbon benefits than would otherwise have been the case.

Defra have consulted on proposed changes to the Defra/DECC guidance on greenhouse gas reporting for businesses, to allow the carbon benefits of woodland creation to contribute to their net emissions. This draft guidance requires that the project is certified to the WCC, and a decision will be made by summer 2011, as indicated in Government's Draft Carbon plan.

Links with Regulatory Framework

The Woodland Carbon Code has been developed on the basis of the robust regulatory framework for Forestry in the United Kingdom and this issue is pivotal in ongoing discussions of permanence (i.e. the requirement that carbon is stored permanently in woodland according to the management plan). Critically, the current regulatory framework provides compliance with many of the principles of forest carbon projects that are applied internationally, but without the bureaucratic burden that is a requirement in many countries. The regulatory framework also avoids the need for title deeds to be amended in favour of permanent woodland cover, a process that would act as a huge deterrent to woodland creation projects.

The main interactions between the WCC and the regulatory framework are outlined below based on the current, near final, working draft of the WCC:

UK Forestry Standard: All projects should comply with UKFS and the underpinning Guideline series to ensure good design, planning, monitoring and environmental and social integrity. The would ensure adherence to the principles of sustainable forest management.

EIA (Forestry) Regulations: A legal requirement to ensure against inappropriate woodland creation (above threshold areas) and that landscape and environmental issues are considered. EIA regulations will also provide protection against permanent woodland removal, particularly when applied in conjunction with the WCC project registry (above minimum threshold). If subject to an Environmental Statement or EIA, this would establish a public consultation process for larger schemes, a requirement of the WCC.

Felling License Regulations (FLRs): In conjunction with the WCC project registry and project documentation, FLRs would allow a felling license to be refused if not in line with the project management plan – even beyond the project life. FLRs would also provide a legal basis for enforcing restocking in line with the management plan and project documentation.

Woodland Grant Scheme support: If in receipt of woodland creation grant-aid (allowed for in the WCC, but subject to a minimum contribution from carbon finance to total project costs), compliance with UKFS, EIA regulations and public consultation/notice via the public register would be assured, as would the requirement for management plans. WGS support also provides for risk-based monitoring of successful establishment. WGS support will also allow cross-checking with other Agency grant schemes to ensure a single land parcel is not being reported as two or more land uses. Non-compliance with UKFS (and therefore the WCC) would also be reported.

Town and Country Planning Act: If woodland creation is a planning requirement (to compensate for woodland loss as a result of development), a project is not eligible for certification to the WCC.

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