

Warm Springs tribes evaluate environmental project after wildfire

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

Five years ago, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs set aside 24,000 acres of forestland for a project to sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gases. Last summer, more than half of that forest went up in smoke in the devastating Lionshead fire.

Now tribes, which earned millions of dollars from the California Air Resources Board for the project, are hard at work

assessing just how much was lost. Bobby Brunoe, general manager for the tribe's branch of natural resources, so far calculates that 15,000 acres of the project area were lost in the fire. Overall, the Lionshead fire burned 204,000 acres, of which 96,000 acres are on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation.

Warm Springs, located 70 miles north of Bend, sells carbon credits earned through California's Cap-and-Trade Program, by protecting its forests so they can continue to capture carbon. The program is a market-based form of regulation that sets an upper limit, or cap, on carbon emissions produced by companies in California.

The carbon offset projects can be located outside of California, a policy that opened the door to participation by Warm Springs. Around the country, there are 136 forest offset projects.

According to the agreement, Warm Springs will maintain and build carbon stands within its project area for 100 years. At Warm Springs, the area considered for protection was zoned as conditional use, a designation that allowed the tribes to log it if they so desired, although it had not been logged before.



Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center
The Lionshead fire burns on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in September.

Entering the Cap-and-Trade Program was a financial incentive to keep the forest intact and increase its carbon intake capacity. But wildfires like Lionshead throw a wrench in those intentions as the burned trees reverse carbon sequestration, sending carbon into the atmosphere.

The California program is protected from wildfire events through its buffer pool of carbon credits, which are available to use in case forest carbon is lost through wildfire or other natural disasters. Each forest project contributes 10% to 20% of its total credits into the buffer account, which acts as a sort of insurance.

The project area on Warm Springs that burned, known as ARC260, is located on the east side of Mount Jefferson. The area will be evaluated for damage, Brunoe said, as not all areas of a forest burn the same — parts of a forest may have a light or heavy burn, or no burn at all. In addition, a burned area is not necessarily out of the carbon project as a standing snag can still be counted as carbon.

The verified estimate of carbon stocks must be completed by a third party within 23 months, according to the California Air Resources Board.

Much of the area where ARC260 is located is inaccessible due to deep snow,

Brunoe said, so research is expected to start in earnest this spring.

"The extent and severity of the fire impact to the Warm Springs carbon project remains unknown and will be under evaluation for the next year and a half, involving detailed forest inventories and modeling," Brunoe said.

Scientists worried

Some scientists have expressed concern that the buffer pool is not sufficiently protected against fire risks over the 100-year period and hold up Warm Springs as an example.

"The fact that the Warm Springs project has burned twice in a decade is a perfect example of the problem," said Danny Cullenward, a lecturer at Stanford Law School and policy director of CarbonPlan, a nonprofit that independently analyzes carbon removal opportunities based on science and data. "There is no way the protocol's buffer pool holds up if that pattern is common in the program."

The wildfire in 2020 wasn't the first time the project area burned. When the project was in the setup stage, a wildfire burned around 2,000 acres of forest within the project boundaries, said Don Sampson, who helped arrange the agreement when he was chief executive of Warm Springs Ventures, the tribe's economic arm. Samp-

son worked for ventures from 2013 to 2016.

"They had to reassess the burned areas and how they would regenerate," Sampson said.

Carbon credits

When the preparation work was complete, the California Air Resources Board issued Warm Springs 2.1 million carbon offset credits. The offsets represented 2.1 million metric tons of verified greenhouse gas emission reductions.

Annual growth within the project boundary can be converted to additional carbon offsets that the tribes can sell. To date, more than 2.6 million Air Resources Board carbon offset credits have been issued to Warm Springs.

"There are about 20 projects in the range of 1 million to 5 million offset credits upfront, and a handful that get as big as almost 15 million," Cullenward said. "I would say Warm Springs is one of the large projects but not atypically large nor on the extreme end of the size distribution."

How are the offset credits used?

In 2018, the tribes announced they had contracted with a third party to sell the credits over several years and that those credits would provide millions of dollars in revenue for tribal operations, improved forest management and economic development initiatives.

The tribes declined to confirm the specific amount received from the agreement. Sampson said the tribes set aside some of the funds for forest thinning and forest health projects, to prevent wildfire and tree disease.

He said it brought them much-needed revenue. "That was the biggest revenue source they had for quite a few years," he said.

Restrictions: Extreme risk assessment effective Friday

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"We believe this modification will provide mental, emotional and economic benefits to our community, without introducing significant risk for increased local transmission. We trust businesses and organizations will faithfully manage within the limited allowances for indoor activity."

Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones sent a similar letter to the governor on Dec. 31, saying that for restaurants and bars, "the 'yo-yo' effect of opening and closing every two weeks is overly burdensome logistically."

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer and Seaside Mayor Jay Barber also endorsed the request.

David Reid, the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, sent a similar letter last week to the governor and the Oregon Health Authority.

He said that if the state has evidence to support prohibitions on indoor activity that it be shared with businesses.

The state reclassified the county as extreme risk — effective Friday — based on the local virus case count.

Columbia Memorial Hospital, Providence Seaside Hospital and Clatsop County partnered this week to administer their remaining vaccines.

People under the federal government's first priority group were invited to vaccination events at the Bob Chisholm Community Center in Seaside on Wednesday and the Clatsop County Fairgrounds on Thursday.

Kujala said combining resources, vaccines and staff will be the model moving forward.

The county, in partnership with Columbia Memo-

rial and Providence Seaside, has created a vaccine task force that is meeting daily to manage the vaccination rollout.

"However, the supply of available vaccines supplied from the state will likely be exhausted this week or next week, and local providers have not yet been informed of additional shipments," the county said in a statement.

"For that reason, the local vaccination effort will remain focused on remaining members of high-priority Phase 1a groups before other identified groups — including teachers and individuals 65 years old and older — can be included."

As of Friday, 1,847 vaccines have been administered in the county.

The vaccination rollout at the federal and state levels has been slow and complicated by uncertainty and conflicting information.

Brown said Friday that Oregon does not expect increased shipments of vaccines next week.

"Last night, I received disturbing news, confirmed to me directly by General (Gustave) Perna of Operation Warp Speed: States will not be receiving increased shipments of vaccines from the national stockpile next week, because there is no federal reserve of doses.

"I am demanding answers from the Trump administration," the governor said in a statement. "I am shocked and appalled that they have set an expectation on which they could not deliver, with such grave consequences.

"This is a deception on a national scale. Oregon's seniors, teachers and all of us were depending on the promise of Oregon's share of the federal reserve of vaccines being released to us."

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