

Wildfire

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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, 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. Sampson worked for ventures from 2013 to 2016.

When the project was in its early stages, said Sampson, a series of independent analyses took place to verify the amount and value of carbon that could be sequestered and offset. The entire process took 3½ years to complete, longer than first anticipated due to some setbacks, including the wildfire that burned around 2,000 acres of the forest.

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

Carbon credits

When the preparation work was complete, the California Air Resources Board issued Warm Springs 2.15 million carbon offset credits. The offsets represented 2.15 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.

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Contributed photo/Oregon Department of Forestry

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs are evaluating a carbon sequester project after much of the project area burned last year.

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,” said Cullenward. “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 revenue in the tens of millions of dollars for tribal operations, improved forest management and economic development initiatives.”

The tribes declined to confirm the specific amount received from the agreement.

‘Much-needed revenue’

Sampson said the tribes set aside some of the funds for forest thinning and forest health projects, to prevent wildfire and tree disease.

“Overall it brought it much-needed revenue,” he said. “That was the biggest revenue source they had for quite a few years.”

Funds were also set aside for a cannabis project, said

Sampson. That project stalled during his tenure at Warm Springs but was later revived into a hemp project, which received federal approval last year.

The decision to enter the program was timely, as it coincided with the winding down of the local sawmill, Warm Springs Forest Products Industries, which was struggling to turn a profit due to a lack of large logs. The program was also consistent

with the tribe’s policy on generating revenue through environmentally conscious ventures.

“Rather than take an extractive approach and cutting timber and selling logs off the reservation, (Tribal Council) wanted to transition to one that was more conservation-based and still make revenue for the tribe,” said Sampson. “So from that point of view, it was a successful project.”

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