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Environment Agency grant kickstarts Soil Carbon Code Creation

A consortium of farmers, academics, technology businesses and NGOs led by Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South-West (FWAG) has been awarded a grant under the Environment Agency's Investment Readiness Fund to develop and pilot a UK Farm Soil Carbon Code.

The project will fill critical knowledge gaps needed to enable the responsible scaling of agricultural carbon investments. It is estimated that this could unlock up to £500m annual revenues by 2030 for farmers and other landowners for adopting regenerative practices that lock up carbon from the atmosphere in agricultural soils. The project has four elements:

- Systematic review research into the soil carbon benefits of regenerative agriculture techniques.
- An evaluation of existing soil carbon market protocols, to see how suitable they are for use in UK farms.
- The creation and piloting of a framework UK Farm Soil Carbon Code to make sure projects have robust protocols to measure, report and verify carbon removals, ensure farmers receive a stable and secure income from carbon markets, even when projects go wrong, and protect investor against double counting or reversal of benefits.
- A demonstration of the commercialisation of soil carbon sequestration through a pilot application of the Code to herbal leys over 100s of hectares of land in a Gloucestershire pilot.

In response to the grant announcement, FWAG Glos Team Leader, FWAG, Jenny Phelps MBE said: *"Farmers are keen to be part of developing the integrity around the standards and verification of a Soil Farm Carbon Code, and as a farmer led charity, FWAG is proud to represent farmers that care about the environment. Many are confused by multiple funding streams and daily offers for carbon and other trading from farmed land through transition, but keen to help and act on climate emergencies.*

"We are delighted to receive this support from the Environment Agency to develop the UK Soil Farm Carbon Code' and we aim to put farmers at the heart of developing the integrity of the code so that this opportunity can be realised and de-risked for farmers so that they can have confidence in the developing carbon markets. We also welcome all partners in this important piece of work."

Matthew Orman, Director of the Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) said: *"The last year has seen an explosion of interest among farmers and investors in a market-place for soil carbon, and a number of schemes paying farmers to sequester carbon are already up and running.*

"A soil carbon code designed specifically for the UK, is needed for this market-place to grow and thrive – balancing the need for credible, robust carbon storage and sequestration calculation with a flexible approach to reflect rapidly evolving innovation and government policy and subsidy schemes, and the successful alignment of public and private investment in soil health."

Annie Leeson, Co-Founder & Director, Agricarbon said: *"The code will set a common standard for 'what good looks like' for sustainable farming and land management businesses aiming to monetise carbon reductions and soil carbon capture and storage. Combined with high integrity measurement of soil carbon, the code will ensure a solid, evidence-based foundation underpins agricultural participation in emerging carbon markets and incentive schemes."*

An expert consortium will draft the code, including Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and the University of Leeds. Mark Reed, Professor of Rural Entrepreneurship at SRUC, said:

"There is evidence that a number of regenerative farming practices can lock up carbon from the atmosphere in soil, helping tackle climate change. While a number of companies are already offering carbon contracts to farmers, there is currently no standard against which claims can be verified and investors cannot make carbon offsetting or insetting claims based on the certificates that are generated. Although standards exist in the international voluntary carbon market, they are not well adapted to the size of farms in the UK and are prohibitively expensive. The UK Farm Soil Carbon Code will be the third national carbon market in the UK, joining ranks with the Woodland Carbon Code and the Peatland Code."

A range of industry stakeholder groups will be engaged in a consultation process to secure feedback and advocacy, and a central access point for sharing this project's findings and allow contributions from outside the organisations will be hosted by the SSA.

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Editor's note:

- The Farm Soil Carbon Code will include a set of formal protocols to allow farmers to quantify and verify reduced greenhouse gas emissions and/or soil carbon capture as a result of adopting regenerative farming practices. It will be applicable for different 'carbon accounting' purposes - offset registries, carbon insetters, carbon capture incentive schemes, ecosystem services and natural capital investment products - whether carbon capture will be monetised or not.
- The application team consists of FWAG, the Sustainable Soils Alliance, Agricarbon, Forest Carbon, Scotland's Rural College, the Countryside and Community Research Institute and the University of Leeds. The wider consortium includes the Soil Association, the Sustainable Food Trust, Cool Farm Alliance, Environment Bank and Sierra View Consulting. A full list can be viewed on the Soil Carbon Code page on www.sustainablesoils.org.
- The pilot project phase will be carried out on 20 initial farms in Gloucestershire, with in depth assessments of management practice on 20 fields (100 Has). Restorative practices will include planting herbal leys (diverse mixes of grasses, legume and herbs) into arable and suitable pasture land across 20 farms in Gloucestershire (farm holdings totaling 10,000Has).
- Several reports have recently indicated a CO2 mitigation potential from UK agriculture at around 10MtCO2e by 2050. This includes a 2019 Royal Society report and the NFU's publication 'Achieving Net Zero Farming's 2040 goal' (9 MtCO2e by 2050).
- A recent report from the World Bank Group projects a global carbon removal market of >23Gt per year by 2030. The more modest IPCC estimate of 10m tonnes CO2e for UK farm GHG removals could still generate addition annual income of £500m to UK farms and land managers.
- The Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) was launched in 2017 to address the current crisis in our soils. Its aim is to campaign to restore UK soils to health within one generation by seeing soil health elevated to where it belongs as a priority alongside clean air and clean water.
- Agricarbon is a Dundee-based start-up offering a breakthrough service to quantify soil carbon changes, with 'real-world', direct soil testing, offering the highest possible levels of measurement accuracy and integrity. Agricarbon uses automation to reduce the cost of sample collection, processing and analysis, and provide an affordable, scalable soil carbon validation service. Their mission is to accelerate a widespread transition to regenerative practices by helping farmers and landowners to unlock the commercial value of soil carbon sequestration and make a material contribution to averting climate catastrophe.

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