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Farmers, ranchers look at possible income stream

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BOISE, Idaho - Carbon trading, or capturing carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas, in vegetation to keep it out of the atmosphere, may offer financial opportunities for farmers and ranchers in the future.

Idaho is approaching the whole subject cautiously.

An advisory committee exists under the chairmanship of the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission. Two pilot project areas have been proposed.

The Idaho National Laboratories has a pilot project seeking to sequester carbon in some of the lava flow formations in east-central Idaho.

"What we know right now is that the whole carbon cycle on Earth is out of synch. Too much carbon dioxide is going into the atmosphere," said Tony Bennett, SCC technical operations manager.

"If we can store some of that carbon dioxide in vegetation, and develop a market for that, it could add to the income stream for farmers and ranchers," he said. Interest is growing. Bennett met with a group of Idaho Falls-area producers in January. Representatives of the National Carbon Offset Coalition Inc. attended that session.

NCOC is a Montana-based organization founded in the late 1990s to assist landowners in planning carbon sequestration activities. It also seeks to document the resulting carbon storage in a way adhering to national standards and protocols.

"Science is showing more and more linkage between greenhouse gases and global warming.

Some are trying to start a trading process in view of future industrial regulations they see coming down the road," Bennett said. "Idaho isn't a big carbon dioxide producer, but this still gives our farmers and ranchers an opportunity. Our advisory committee is looking at how to make that work," he said. Idaho's involvement began in 2002, when the SCC was instructed by the state Legislature to prepare a report exploring the potential for carbon sequestration on agricultural and private forest lands within the state.

That same legislation also called for appointing a 16-member carbon sequestration advisory committee. The SCC was appointed chairman. The report, released in February 2003 gave five recommendations:

- Explore avenues to increase carbon sequestration within the state, including geologic, agricultural and forestry, and joining the Big Sky Carbon Sequestration Regional Partnership and the National Carbon Offset Coalition.
- Enhance carbon sequestration research relevant to Idaho, using or reviewing several existing models and research projects at various universities within and outside Idaho, plus the Idaho National Laboratories and the USDA-Agricultural Research Service.
- Evaluate economic benefits to Idaho landowners and the state through carbon markets, and initiate a carbon market trade.
- Reconfigure the advisory committee, adding a geologist, a tribal representative and an economist to its membership.
- Sign memorandums of understanding with other organizations.

This was accomplished in January 2005 when the Idaho advisory committee signed an MOU with the Big Sky Regional Carbon Sequestration Project. Under that MOU, Idaho is working with Montana, South Dakota and Wyoming to define characteristics of promising terrestrial and geologic storage sites.

Efforts are also under way to identify and apply future greenhouse gas measurement and verification technologies, and identify carbon sequestration technologies and practices.

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