# Carbon farming in WA Wheatbelt sparks debate over financial risks and scientific uncertainty



Efforts to promote carbon farming among growers in Western Australia's Wheatbelt region have sparked debate over the viability and financial risks of the practice. Carbon Sync, a carbon farming project developer funded by Chevron, is actively recruiting farmers in the catchments around Irwin and Mingenew, approximately 360 kilometres north of Perth, to participate in soil carbon sequestration schemes. The initiative seeks to alter land management strategies to enhance carbon storage in soil, with farmers able to sell stored carbon as Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs) to companies aiming to offset carbon emissions.

Carbon Sync currently manages 15,000 hectares in the region and charges participating landholders a flat fee of $15,000 annually for the first five years, regardless of property size. Managing director Louise Edmonds explained that Carbon Sync assumes the risk and responsibility for each project, taking 35 per cent of ACCUs generated as its share. She stated, "Building soil carbon is quite a slow process, and in our projects we will baseline in the first year of the project, then come back five years later to measure the increase in soil." Ms Edmonds noted that while all projects are in their initial year and thus lack data on stored carbon, the methodology has been developed over a decade and is now supported by sufficient confidence in its efficacy.

Soil carbon measurement involves analysing a one-metre core sample in a laboratory, with repeat testing after five years to assess changes. Ms Edmonds framed the current projects as trials, saying, "These things don't happen quickly, and the approach that we're taking is a commercial approach to demonstrating the viability of the projects." She highlighted that projects on Australia's east coast registered five to six years ago have begun to show significant soil carbon gains, with the Clean Energy Regulator issuing 150,000 ACCUs across two Queensland projects under the soil carbon method in 2024.

Despite these optimistic views, expert scrutiny raises concerns about the scientific and financial feasibility of soil carbon projects in this region. Andrew Macintosh, an environmental law and policy scholar at the Australian National University, expressed scepticism regarding carbon sequestration potential in the soils around Irwin and Mingenew. Speaking to the ABC, he cautioned that farmers risk committing to "permanence obligations" of 25 or 100 years without guarantees of carbon accumulation, potentially leading to lost credits or liabilities. He explained that natural seasonal and climatic variability causes soil carbon levels to fluctuate more significantly than changes induced by land management. "Seasonal variability is the primary driver of the changes in soil carbon stocks," he said, warning that this variability could result in no credits or revenue despite farmers' actions.

Mr Macintosh attributed ongoing issues to poor administration by the Clean Energy Regulator and suggested many farmers may not be fully informed. "I fear that these people haven't been told the whole truth," he said. A spokesperson for the regulator responded by acknowledging inherent risks in emission avoidance and sequestration projects but maintained that the scheme employs "scientifically robust methods, conservative measurement and modelling approaches, and comprehensive administrative controls" to manage crediting risks.

From a local agricultural perspective, Dee McKeown, chief executive of the Mingenew Irwin Group, a farmer representative body, expressed cautious interest in soil carbon farming. While supportive of its potential, he emphasised the need for more evidence and practical demonstration of its suitability for the region's unique soil types and climate. Mr McKeown highlighted the importance of maintaining operational efficiency and land productivity, noting that growers seek "genuine options" that do not impose undue risks or compromise food security. "Growers are very unique in that science only applies when they see it in practice because regions are so different," he said.

Carbon Sync continues to pursue its projects, confident in their commercial and environmental potential despite the recognised uncertainties. The evolving landscape of soil carbon farming in Western Australia's Wheatbelt remains under close observation as stakeholders weigh the balance of innovation against financial and ecological risk. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is reporting on these developments as they unfold.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.chevron.com/newsroom/2023/q3/chevron-to-fund-new-soil-carbon-capture-pilot-and-blue-carbon-research-projects-in-western-australia> - This article details Chevron's investment in Carbon Sync's soil carbon sequestration pilot project in Western Australia, involving up to 80,000 hectares of cropping and grazing land.
* <https://www.carbonsync.com.au/carbon-sync-latest-news/news/2023/chevron-provides-funding-to-carbon-sync> - This announcement from Carbon Sync highlights Chevron's funding for their soil carbon sequestration pilot project in Western Australia.
* <https://www.hartenergy.com/exclusives/chevron-announces-investments-western-australia-projects-206126> - This article discusses Chevron's investments in two lower-carbon projects in Western Australia, including funding for Carbon Sync's soil carbon sequestration pilot project.
* <https://www.offshore-technology.com/news/chevron-lower-carbon-projects/> - This report covers Chevron's investment in Carbon Sync's soil carbon sequestration pilot project in Western Australia, marking Chevron's first nature-based carbon offsets project in Australia.
* <https://www.energy-pedia.com/news/australia/chevron-to-fund-new-soil-carbon-capture-pilot-and-blue-carbon-research-projects-in-western-australia-192375> - This article details Chevron's funding of Carbon Sync's soil carbon sequestration pilot project in Western Australia, involving up to 80,000 hectares of cropping and grazing land.
* <https://www.chevron.com/newsroom/2023/q3/chevron-to-fund-new-soil-carbon-capture-pilot-and-blue-carbon-research-projects-in-western-australia> - This announcement from Chevron outlines their investment in Carbon Sync's soil carbon sequestration pilot project in Western Australia, involving up to 80,000 hectares of cropping and grazing land.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiqwFBVV95cUxQVnNlTThtOTBibHBDRWQyZHl0RThVb3RnRW9VSERFNzNQd3lvajdqR3pMSllRTUxTWFVaOVVRNWVEVUZ4TlA1NUlaMGswOG5CZ0w4czE0RG1tQURpRVZEQTNINFhGSmtyNWhxTGNYQTQzMzlZR1VkOGtVUzJ5OXB0OS0tZXF0R29RU3JOdWRScTZYRElLQk9lNE1zOUJieENMTEpENHNmNEdrVk3SAVJBVV95cUxNbWtUWGVxbXhlaVV5ZEQ1WHhaS2ZlMlhvTVE5cjluZ3J5RlJVUkM4cnpzTDNHaElZd3c4VVk4YTdLaThTb3dVRlNYWGswUEdHWWZB?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data