

## Feature

# The Carbon Ranch: Fighting Climate Change... One Acre at a Time

by Courtney White

*Right now, the only possibility of large-scale removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere is through plant photosynthesis and related land-based carbon sequestration activities. Strategies include: enriching soil carbon, no-till farming with perennials, employing climate-friendly livestock practices, conserving natural habitat, restoring degraded watersheds and rangelands, increasing biodiversity, lowering agricultural emissions, and producing local food. Over the past decade, these strategies have been demonstrated individually to be both practical and profitable. A carbon ranch bundles them into an economic and ecological whole with the aim of reducing the atmospheric content of CO<sub>2</sub> while producing substantial co-benefits for all living things.*

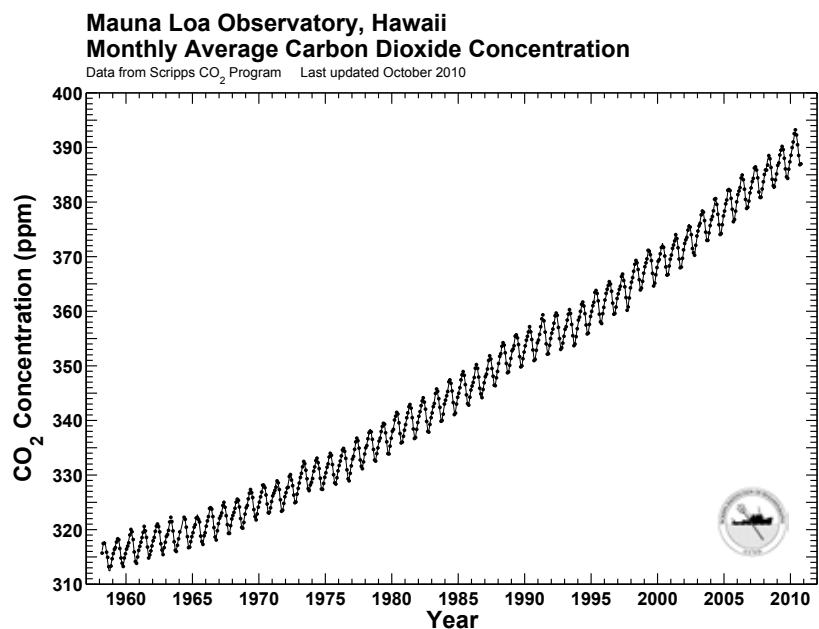
### The Anguished Question

*"What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment."*

– Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, head of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in 2007

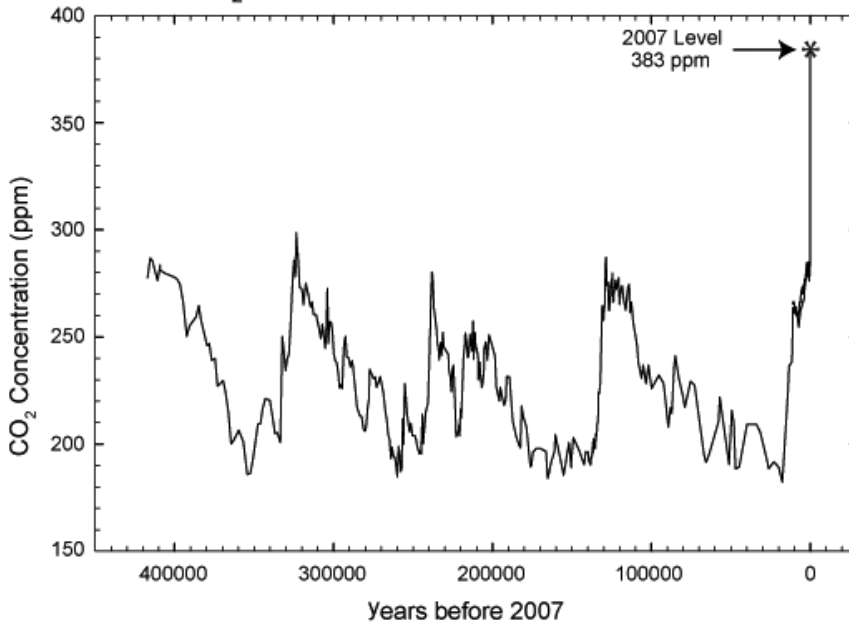
The climate challenge now confronting all societies on the planet is as daunting as it is straightforward: under a Business-As-Usual scenario, the rising content of heat-trapping trace gases in the atmosphere – principally carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide – pose a dramatic and potentially catastrophic threat to life on Earth.

The science of climate change and its correlation with industrial activity seems clear. The challenge—and the opportunity—we face can be summarized in three pertinent graphs from the Scripps Institute at UC San Diego ([http://scrippsCO2.ucsd.edu/program\\_history](http://scrippsCO2.ucsd.edu/program_history)) which chart the rise of the atmospheric content of carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas that has significantly contributed to a rise of 0.8 Celsius in the Earth's temperature since 1750. [1]



The first graph (above) shows the famous Keeling Curve. This graph represents concentrations of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> in parts-per-million (ppm) as measured by the Scripps Institute's observatory on Mauna Loa, Hawaii, under the direction of Dr. Charles Keeling. The annual highs and lows reflect the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> 'breathed in' by the planet's vegetation in the spring and 'exhaled' in the fall. In 1780, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere was approximately 280 ppm.

## CO<sub>2</sub> Over Past 420 Thousand Years



The second graph (above) compares the current level of CO<sub>2</sub> ppm to the historical record. The dips correspond with planetary cooling periods (“ice ages”) and the subsequent rises correlate with warming trends. Note that past CO<sub>2</sub> maximums barely exceeded 300 ppm. Today, it is 390 ppm – the highest level in at least 2.1 million years. [2]

The third graph (right) is a scientific projection of CO<sub>2</sub> under current emission trends. Under a Business-as-Usual model, CO<sub>2</sub> will rise to 1500 ppm, or thereabouts, and not return to pre-industrial levels even tens of thousands of years into the future.

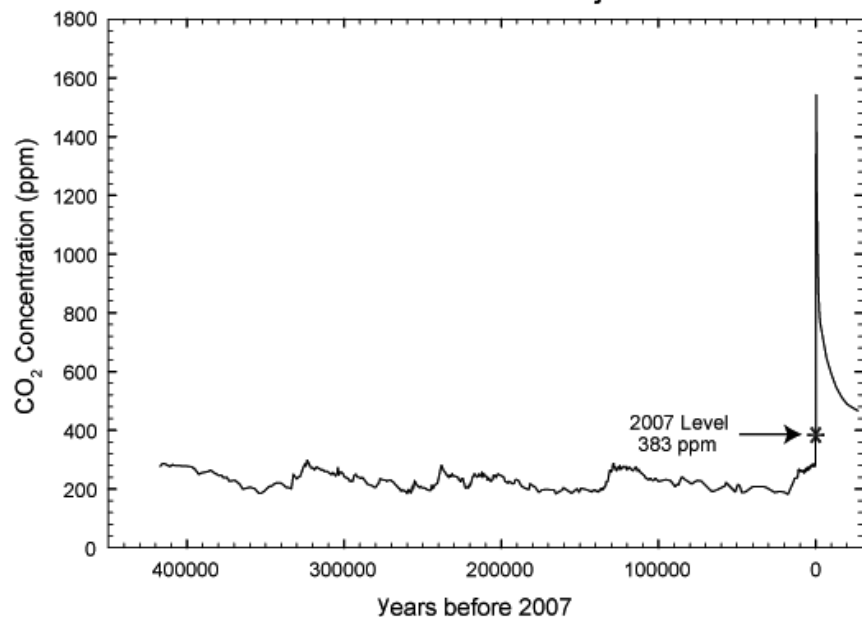
What does this mean? A comparable rise in CO<sub>2</sub> took place during the Permian period, culminating 251 million years ago in the “Great Dying” when 90% of all species on the planet went extinct. The difference is that during the Permian period, it took millions of years to reach 1500 ppm, whereas it might take us only a few centuries. Furthermore, human civilization is coterminous with the current Holocene period whose remarkably stable climate over

the past 10,000 years gave rise to the agricultural revolution, among many other developments. However, a rising level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere jeopardizes this stability, perhaps permanently (on human time-scales), even without reaching Permian-like CO<sub>2</sub> maximums.

Dr. James Hansen, the Director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies and the nation’s top climate scientist, states it this way: “Business-as-usual greenhouse gas emissions, without any doubt, will commit the planet to global warming of a magnitude that will lead eventually to an ice-free planet.” [3]

Clearly, action is required, but a critical question needs to be addressed first: What “safe” level of CO<sub>2</sub> ppm should we aim for? (Note I am focusing on CO<sub>2</sub> for two reasons: 1) It is the most prevalent and long-lasting greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. 2) The warming effect of the other trace gases is being offset currently by the cooling effect of atmospheric aerosols such as soot and other forms of pollution that reflect solar radiation back into space.)

## Business-As-Usual Projection



As recently as five years ago, calls to limit atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> focused on staying below the doubled pre-industrial level of 280 ppm. For example, in a 2004 paper published in *Science*, two Princeton University scientists argued for the stabilization of CO<sub>2</sub> at 500 ppm, which required that greenhouse gas emissions be held near the (then) present level of seven billion tons of carbon per year (GtC/year) for the next fifty years. [4]

By 2007, in response to new research, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) lowered the CO<sub>2</sub> target to 450 ppm while also calling for a substantially speeded up timeline for emissions reduction. This new target became widely accepted among many non-scientists, who saw it as a politically “realistic” goal that also kept overall global warming within acceptable levels of concern. [5]

Then, in the fall of 2008, Dr. Hansen co-authored a paper that set a new CO<sub>2</sub> target: 350 ppm. The reason for the lower target was twofold: (1) Hansen et al argued that slow planetary feedback processes, such as polar ice sheet disintegration and methane gas releases, were not included in previous models of global warming and may come into play much faster than anyone anticipated. This means first, that more warming is already in the “pipeline” than previously calculated, and second, their analysis of the paleoclimate record indicates that a CO<sub>2</sub> amount on the order of 450 ppm, if maintained, would push Earth toward an ice-free state – a critical tipping point that must be avoided.

In summary, they wrote: *“Paleoclimate evidence and ongoing global changes imply that today’s CO<sub>2</sub> is already too high to maintain the climate to which humanity, wildlife, and the rest of the biosphere are adapted.”* (emphasis added) [6]

Since 2008, many climate activists, researchers and policymakers around the world have embraced the 350 ppm target. For example, journalist Bill McKibben, who raised the first popular alarm about global warming back in 1989 with his book *The End of Nature*, has founded *350.org*, a non-profit whose mission is to reduce atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>

by inspiring “the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis [and] create a new sense of urgency and of possibility for our planet.” [7]

If we accept the arguments that Hansen, McKibben and many others make for an atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> target of 350 ppm—and I do—then how do we get there?

Historian and novelist Wallace Stegner once said that all books should try to answer an “anguished question.” [8] The same is true for ideas, movements and emergency efforts. In the case of climate change, the anguished question is this: **What can we do right now to help reduce atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> from its current level of 390 ppm back to 350 ppm?**

In an editorial published in July 2009, Dr. Hansen proposed an answer: “Cut off the largest source of these emissions – coal – and allow CO<sub>2</sub> to drop back down to 350 ppm through agricultural and forestry practices that increase carbon storage in trees and soil.” [9] In their 2008 paper, Hansen et al specifically say that a 50 ppm drawdown via forestry and agricultural practices is quite plausible.

These words should be considered “Operating Instructions” for the 21st century. Personally, I’m not sure what to do about the coal side of his equation, which requires governmental action, but I have an idea about how to increase carbon storage in soils.

I call it A Carbon Ranch.

### **What Goes Up Must Come Down**

*“Carbon is the basic building block for life. It is only a pollutant when in excess in the atmosphere or dissolved in water. Over millennia a highly effective carbon cycle has evolved to capture, store, transfer, release and recapture biochemical energy in the form of carbon compounds. The health of the soil—and therefore the vitality of plants, animals and people depends on the effective functioning of this cycle.”* – Dr. Christine Jones, soil scientist

The purpose of A Carbon Ranch is to mitigate climate change by sequestering additional CO<sub>2</sub> in plants and soils, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and producing co-benefits that build ecologi-

cal and economic resilience in local landscapes.

According to the dictionary, “sequester” means: to withdraw for safekeeping, to place in seclusion, to place into custody, or to hold in solution – all of which are good definitions for the process of sequestering CO<sub>2</sub> in plants and soils via photosynthesis and sound stewardship.

To understand how A Carbon Ranch works, we have to start with the fundamentals. The process by which atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is converted into soil carbon is neither new nor mysterious. It has been going on for tens of millions of years

and all it requires is sunlight, green plants, water, nutrients and soil microbes (For more details see Dr. Christine Jones’ work, available on her website [www.amazingcarbon.com](http://www.amazingcarbon.com))

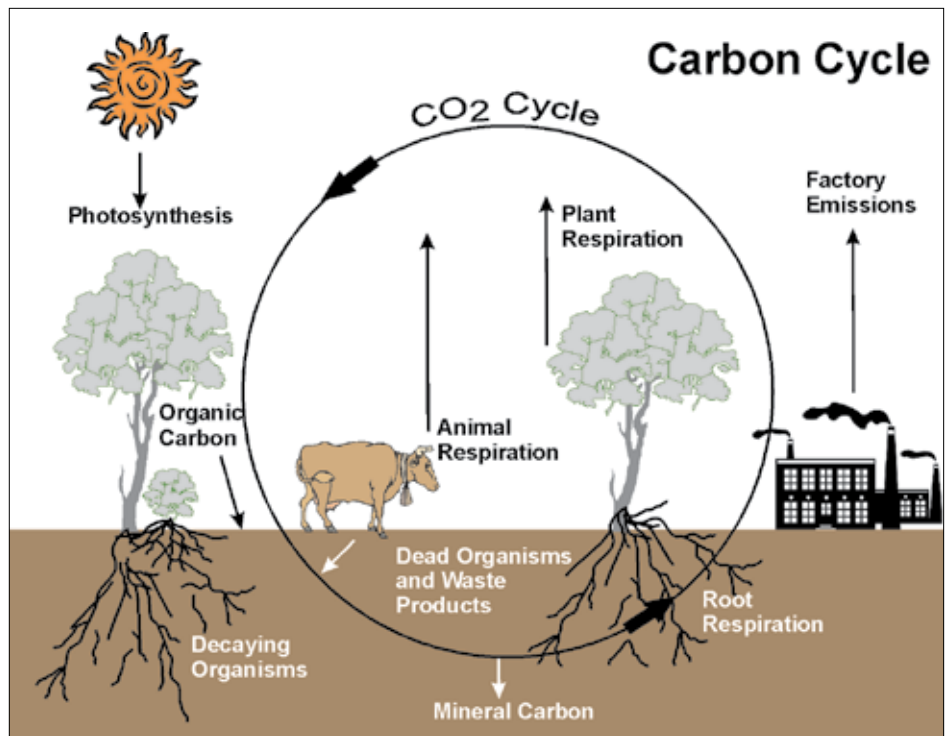
There are four basic steps to the CO<sub>2</sub>/ oil carbon process:

- Photosynthesis
- Resynthesis
- Exudation
- Humification

**Photosynthesis:** This is the process by which energy in sunlight is transformed into biochemical energy in the form of a simple sugar called glucose, via green plants, which use CO<sub>2</sub> from the air, water and soil and release oxygen as a by-product.

**Resynthesis:** Through a complex sequence of chemical reactions, glucose is resynthesized into a wide variety of carbon compounds, including carbohydrates (such as cellulose and starch), proteins, organic acids, waxes and oils (including hydrocarbons) – all of which serve as “fuel” for life on Earth.

**Exudation:** Around 30-40% of the carbon created by photosynthesis can be exuded directly into soil to nurture the microbes that grow plants and build healthy soil. This process is essential to the creation



of topsoil from the lifeless mineral soil produced by the weathering of rocks over time. The amount of increase in organic carbon is governed by the volume of plant roots per unit of soil and their rate of growth. More active green leaves mean more roots, which mean more carbon exuded.

**Humification:** This is the process of creating a chemically stable type of organic matter composed of large, complex molecules made up of carbon, nitrogen, minerals, and soil particles. Visually, humus is the dark, rich layer of topsoil that people generally associate with stable wetlands, healthy rangelands and productive farmland. Land management practices that promote the high ecological integrity of the soil are key to the creation and maintenance of humus. Once carbon is sequestered as humus it has a high resistance to decomposition, and therefore can remain intact and stable for hundreds or thousands of years. A lack of humus can mean that the carbon exuded from plant roots simply oxidizes and recycles back to the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>.

Additionally, high humus content in soil improves water infiltration and storage, because of its sponge-like quality and high water-retaining capacity. Recent research demonstrates that one part

of humus can retain as much as four parts water. This has important positive consequences for the recharge of aquifers and base flows to rivers and streams.

In sum, the natural process of converting sunlight into humus is an organic way to pull CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere and sequester it in soil for long periods of time. If the land is bare, degraded or unstable due to erosion, and if it can be restored to a healthy condition with properly functioning carbon, water, mineral and nutrient cycles; and if it is covered with green plants with deep roots, then the quantity of CO<sub>2</sub> that can be sequestered is potentially high. Conversely, when healthy, stable land becomes degraded or loses green plants, the carbon cycle can become disrupted and will release stored CO<sub>2</sub> back into the atmosphere.

In other words, healthy soil = healthy carbon cycle = storage of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. Any land management activity that encourages this equation, especially if it results in the additional storage of CO<sub>2</sub>, can help fight climate change.

Or as Dr. Christine Jones states: "***Any...practice that improves soil structure is building soil carbon.***" [10]

What would those practices be?

In the arid rangelands of the Southwestern United States, there are six strategies to increase or maintain soil health and thus the carbon content of grass or shrub-dominated ecosystems. Sequestration strategies include: 1) planned grazing systems, especially on degraded soils; 2) active restoration of riparian, riverine and wetland zones; and 3) removal of woody vegetation, where appropriate, so that grass may grow in its stead. Maintenance strategies include: 4) the conservation of open space so there is no further loss of carbon-storing soils; 5) the implementation of no-till farming practices; and 6) management of land for long-term resilience, i.e., increasing the capacity of land and people to adjust to perturbation and changing climatic conditions.

Fortunately, a great deal of the land management "toolbox" required to implement these strategies has been tried and tested by practitioners, landowners, agencies and researchers. Some of it remains controversial in certain quarters despite its

demonstrated on-the-ground success, and much of it is currently blocked by economic, bureaucratic and paradigmatic obstacles.

Sequestration strategies and their role in the holistic vision called "A Carbon Ranch" include the following:

1) **Planned grazing systems.** The carbon content of soil can be increased by three principal methods:

- the establishment of green plants on previously bare ground;
- deepening the roots of existing healthy plants; and
- the general improvement of nutrient, mineral, and water cycles in a given area.

Planned grazing is key to all three. By controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of animal impact on the land, the "carbon rancher" can improve plant density, diversity and vigor. Specific actions include:

- the soil cap-breaking action of herbivore hooves, which promotes seed-to-soil contact and water infiltration;
- the 'herd' effect of concentrated animals, which can provide a positive form of perturbation to a landscape by turning plant litter back into the soil (An intensive version of this effect is sometimes called a "poop-and-stomp.");
- the stimulative effect of grazing on plants, followed by a long interval of rest (often a year), which causes roots to expand while removing old, oxidized forage; targeted grazing of noxious or invasive plants which promotes native species diversity and vigor; and
- the targeted application of animal waste, which provides important nutrients to plants and soil microbes.

Additionally, planned grazing systems – including management-intensive, time-controlled, short-duration, and mob-grazing systems – have the advantage of focusing the practitioner's attention on the day-to-day and week-to-week condition of the land. This enables the manager to achieve specific ecological goals effectively, such as the goal of increased quantity, density and vigor of green plants (and thus increased carbon storage).



Cattle waiting to move onto fresh pasture - mob-grazing.  
(Photo by Tamara Gadzia)



Creating a new floodplain on the Dry Cimarron River.  
(Photo by Tamara Gadzia)

2) **Active restoration of riparian, riverine, and wetland areas.** Many arroyos, creeks, rivers, and wetlands in the Southwest exist in a degraded condition, the result of historical overuse by humans, livestock and industry. The consequence has been widespread soil erosion, loss of riparian vegetation, the disruption of hydrological cycles, the decline of water storage capacity in stream banks, the loss of wetlands, and many other examples of land “sickness.” The restoration of these areas to health, especially efforts that contribute to soil retention and formation, such as the reestablishment of humus-rich wetlands, will result in additional storage of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> in soils. The toolbox for the restoration of these areas is now well-developed, practical and potentially capable of being implemented at scale if desired. There are many co-benefits of restoring riparian areas and wetlands to health as well, including improved habitat for wildlife, increased forage for herbivores, improved water quality and quantity for downstream users, and a reduction in erosion and sediment transport.

3) **Removal of woody vegetation.** Many meadows, valleys, and rangelands have witnessed a dramatic invasion of woody species such as piñon and juniper trees over the past century, mostly as a consequence of the suppression of natural fire and overgrazing by livestock (which removes the grass needed to carry a fire). The elimination of overabundant trees by agencies and landowners via prescribed fire or other means has been the focus of

much restoration activity in the Southwest recently. The general goal of this work is to encourage grass species to grow in place of trees, thus improving the carbon-storing capacity of the soil. Not only can soils store more CO<sub>2</sub> than trees, they also have the advantage of relative permanence. Trees can burn up, be cut down, or die of disease or old age, all of which can ultimately release stored CO<sub>2</sub> back into the atmosphere. Additionally, the removal of trees has an important co-benefit: they are a potential source of local biomass energy production, which can help reduce a ranch’s carbon footprint.

Maintenance strategies that help keep stored CO<sub>2</sub> in soils, so they won’t be lost back into the atmosphere, include the following:

4) **The conservation of open space.** The loss of forest, range or agricultural land to subdivision or other types of development can dramatically reduce or eliminate the land’s ability to pull CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere via green plants. Fortunately, there are multiple strategies that conserve open space today, including public parks, private purchase, conservation easements, tax incentives, zoning and economic diversification that helps to keep a farm or ranch in operation. Perhaps most importantly, the protection of the planet’s forests and peatlands from destruction is crucial to an overall climate change mitigation effort. Not only are forests and peatlands important sinks for CO<sub>2</sub>, their destruction releases large amounts of stored carbon back into the atmosphere.



Removing invasive juniper on to restore native grasslands.  
(Photo by Kirk Gadzia)



Moving the herd through an open landscape.  
(Photo by Avery C. Anderson)

Note that “protection” may still result in the loss of stored carbon if the land stewardship practices don’t maintain or improve the health of plants and soil. A farm or ranch, for instance, may be protected from development by a conservation easement but its poor ecological condition (or its poor management) may cause CO<sub>2</sub> to leak back into the atmosphere. This is one reason why those farms and ranches that have already improved the health of their land, and thus improved the carbon storage capacity of their soils, need to be supported economically, socially and politically so that they benefit from their good work and continue to practice good stewardship.

5) **The implementation of no-till farming practices.** Plowing exposes stored soil carbon to the elements, including the erosive power of wind and rain, which can quickly cause it dissipate back into the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>. No-till farming practices, especially organic ones (no pesticides or herbicides), not only protect soil carbon and reduce erosion, they often improve soil structure by promoting the creation of humus. Additionally, farming practices that leave plants in the ground year-round both protect stored soil carbon and promote increased storage via photosynthesis. An important co-benefit of organic, no-till practices is the production of healthy food.

6) **Building long-term resilience.** Nature, like society, doesn’t stand still for long. Things change constantly, sometimes slowly, sometimes in a rush. Some changes are significant, such as a major forest fire or a prolonged drought, and can result in ecological

threshold-crossing events, often with deleterious consequences. “Resilience” refers to the capacity of land, or people, to “bend” with these changes without “breaking.” Managing a forest through thinning and prescribed fire so that it can avoid a destructive, catastrophic fire is an example of building resilience into a system.

Managing land for long-term carbon sequestration in vegetation and soils requires building resilience as well, including the economic resilience of the landowners, managers and community members. For example, cooperation among disparate individuals or groups such as biologists, conservationists, ranchers and policymakers —with the goal of improving land health can help to build ecological and economic resilience within a watershed. This can have two important effects: direct storage of CO<sub>2</sub> in the soil, as humus is created, and the strengthening of relationships required for the maintenance of healthy soil over time.

All of these strategies have been demonstrated to be effective in a wide variety of landscapes. The difficult job now is how to integrate them into a “climate-friendly” landscape that sequesters increasing amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> each year, and does so economically.

But all of this raises an important question: Is CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration in soils actually worth pursuing? In other words, can the potential amount of CO<sub>2</sub> stored as soil carbon make a difference in the Big Picture? The quick answer is yes.

A report published in 2007 by the Congressional Budget Office said that about half of total annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions planet-wide are currently being absorbed by the world's oceans, soils and vegetation, which, together with the atmosphere, form the planet's only natural carbon sinks. The other half of those emissions remain in the atmosphere. The United States produces about six billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year (6GtC), which is one-quarter of the global total, while its current land-use and forestry practices have the net effect of removing the equivalent of about 0.8 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere annually.

According to the report, "Studies estimate that biological sequestration has the technological potential to sequester about 40 billion to 60 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> in the United States over the course of 50 years and another few tens of billions of tons over the following half-century." [11] That's approximately 1GtC per year, or one-sixth of what the U.S. produces annually. A billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> = 1 gigaton (GtC) and 1ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> = 2.12 GtC. Therefore, sequestering 1 GtC per year in the United States would reduce 0.5 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. Since the atmospheric content of CO<sub>2</sub> is rising at a rate of 2 ppm annually, soils could potentially have a significant effect on climate change.

According to Dr. Hansen, while fossil fuels are adding 8.5 GtC per year into the atmosphere, the atmospheric increase of CO<sub>2</sub> is only 4.5 GtC per year – which means 4 GtC is going into carbon sinks. He estimates that 3 GtC are being absorbed by the oceans. This means 1 GtC is being absorbed by everything else. He sees this as good news.

"The fact that Earth's land masses continue to produce a net sink of carbon dioxide provides a glimmer of hope for the task of stabilizing climate," he writes. "This carbon sink occurs despite large-scale deforestation in many parts of the world, as well as



Restored grasslands on the JX Ranch, south of Tucumcari, New Mexico.  
(Photo by Courtney White)

agricultural practices that tend to release soil carbon to the atmosphere. Improved agricultural and forestry practices could significantly increase the uptake of carbon dioxide." [12]

How is this possible?

There is a simple answer: Two-thirds of the Earth's land mass is grassland – and home to two billion people who depend on livestock at least partially for their livelihood. This means that managing the land for CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration, even on a small scale, could have a big impact on people and the planet. Livestock are key both economically and ecologically. Important as a source of food and wealth (also culture) to much of the Earth's human population, livestock could be mobilized for carbon action.

"Healthy grasslands, livestock and associated livelihoods constitute a win-win option for addressing climate change in fragile, dryland areas where pastoralism remains the most rational strategy for the wellbeing of communities," write the authors of a United Nations' Food and Agriculture Report. "***It is a win-win scenario for sequestering carbon, reversing environmental degradation and improving the health, well-being and long term sustainability of livestock based livelihoods.***" (emphasis added) [13]

Critics who view livestock grazing as a negative environmental stressor and argue for its complete

cessation might be surprised to learn that early research, according to Dr. Peter Smith (professor of Soils and Global Change at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland), indicates that “carbon accrual on optimally grazed lands is often greater than on ungrazed or overgrazed land.” [14]

Taken together, sequestering CO<sub>2</sub> in the soil has the potential to significantly mitigate the climate crisis. However, A Carbon Ranch must do more than just photosynthesize energy.

### **The Sins of Emission**

*“Let’s be clear...We will still have to radically reduce carbon emissions, and do so quickly. We will still have to eliminate the use of fossil fuels and adopt substantially more sustainable agricultural methods. We will still have to deal with the effects of ecosystems damaged by carbon overload.”* – editors of *The Wall Street Journal*

Here is the reality check. The increased sequestration of CO<sub>2</sub> in soils won’t solve climate change. It won’t even be close if the emissions of greenhouse gases are not dramatically reduced at the same time. According to experts, this reduction must be on the order of 50-80% of current emissions levels within 50 years in order to avoid surpassing the 450 ppm threshold that many consider an upper limit for a viable planet. Accomplishing this goal will require a massive rearrangement of our energy sector toward fossil fuel-free technologies as well as big changes in the everyday lives of Americans. That’s a Tall Order, of course, but if we are serious about slowing or reversing the accumulation of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, then it should be clear that Business-As-Usual can’t continue much longer.

A Carbon Ranch can help in three ways: (1) by measuring and then reducing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions it contributes to the atmosphere; (2) by producing renewable energy “on-ranch” which it can use itself and/or sell to a local or regional power grid; and (3) by participating in local food, recreation and restoration activities that lower our economy’s dependence on fossil fuels.

It is important to note that the current CO<sub>2</sub> crisis did not develop after post-World War II, but began

with the invention of agriculture 10,000 years ago. Plowing, clearing, burning, desiccation, erosion and the draining of wetlands all contributed to an important loss of stored soil carbon back into the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>. In fact, some scientists calculate that fossil fuel burning surpassed agriculture and deforestation as the primary source of CO<sub>2</sub> only in the 1970s. Today, more than four times as much global warming comes from fossil fuels than from land use activities. Also, much of the CO<sub>2</sub> released historically by agriculture has fallen back to earth.

Lastly, A Carbon Ranch can help by confronting the controversy over offsets and carbon credits which are the two strategies most frequently touted by governments, businesses, agencies and others for encouraging the creation of a so-called “carbon marketplace.” In this marketplace, “credits” created by the sequestration of CO<sub>2</sub> in one place can be ‘sold’ or traded to ‘offset’ a CO<sub>2</sub> polluting entity, such as a coal plant or airline company, someplace else—supposedly to the benefit of all. In reality, these schemes appear to mostly offset our guilty feelings rather than actually affect climate change.

Here’s how A Carbon Ranch can help reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions:

#### **1) Reducing the “footprint” of A Carbon Ranch.**

This is a two-step process. The first step is to assess the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that are rising from a particular landscape or operation. The second is to follow this assessment with a concerted effort to reduce these emissions. One way to measure this carbon footprint is to conduct a Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA) of an enterprise—an inventory of the material and energy inputs and outputs characteristic of each stage of a product’s life cycle. This is a recognized procedure for tracking the ecological impacts of a television set or a refrigerator, for example; different types of LCAs exist for different types of products. [15]

For A Carbon Ranch, there are four important measures of its LCA:

- Cumulative energy use
- Ecological footprint
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Eutrophying emissions



cultivation (12%), with burning, landfill, sewage, manure, termites and release from the ocean making up the remaining 31%.

- Methane is also produced by rainforests, whales, termites, bison, reindeer, camels, giraffes, and many other animals, and has been rising into the atmosphere for millions of years.
- The methane we should really be worried about is the type found in frozen beds of methane hydrates located below permafrost layers and shallow seabeds which, when melted, will release very significant amounts of the potent greenhouse gas into the atmosphere.
- According to the Soil Association of the United Kingdom: "Grassland left ungrazed on fields unsuitable for ploughing emits as much methane when it decays over-winter as if consumed by ruminants..." [17]
- The vast majority of methane produced by the agricultural sector comes from a system drenched in fossil fuels.

Author Michael Pollan put the last point this way: "We transformed a system that in 1940 produced 2.3 calories of food energy for every calorie of fossil-fuel energy it used into one that now takes 10 calories of fossil-fuel energy to produce a single calorie of modern supermarket food. Put another way, when we eat from the industrial food system, we are eating oil and spewing greenhouse gases." [18]

The answer, Pollan says, is to "resolarize" the American economy – which means weaning Americans off their heavy 20th-century diet of fossil fuel and put them back on a diet of contemporary sunshine. "If any part of the modern economy can be freed from its dependence on oil and successfully resolarized," Pollan writes, "surely it is food."

For the purposes of A Carbon Ranch, the methane emission issue is just one part of the overall 'footprint' assessment. The goal of a Life-Cycle Analysis is to measure an operation's energy use and emissions so that it can reduce both over time. Ultimately, the goal is to become carbon-neutral or, ideally, carbon-negative – meaning, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> sequestered is greater than the ranch's carbon footprint.

2) **Producing renewable energy.** Anything that A Carbon Ranch can do to produce energy on-site will help balance its energy footprint and could reduce the economy's overall dependence on fossil fuels. This includes wind and solar farms, the production of biodiesel from certain on-site crops for use in ranch vehicles; biomass for cogeneration projects (This is especially attractive if it uses the woody debris being removed from the ranch anyway.), micro-hydro, micro-wind and solar for domestic use; and perhaps other as yet unrealized renewable energy alternatives.

3) **Participating in a local economy.** A Carbon Ranch should carefully consider its role in the 'footprint' of the greater economy. Are its products traveling long distances or otherwise burning large amounts of fossil fuels? Ditto for visitors, ranch owners and employees. Does participating in a local economy – food, recreation, and energy – increase or decrease the overall footprint of the ranch? How else can it reduce greenhouse gas emissions locally or regionally? For example, it is generally accepted that involvement in a local food market, where the distances between producer and eater are short, shrinks the fossil footprint of a ranch considerably. There is some contradictory research on this point, however. In my opinion, the technical issues of local vs. global food systems in terms of food miles traveled is largely neutralized by the wide variety of co-benefits that local food brings economically and ecologically. This will be discussed in the next section.

4) **The trouble with offsets.** In the past few years, efforts to monetize or incentivize carbon sequestration have focused on creating a carbon marketplace complete with so-called carbon credits that can be bought or traded to offset the carbon emissions of a polluting entity. This marketplace generally requires a "cap" on total carbon emissions, whether regionally or nationally, so that a "value" or price can be placed on the credits themselves. In other words, if a polluter exceeds its cap by a certain percentage, then it can buy or trade for an offset that brings it back into compliance. This cap-and-trade idea was the heart of the Waxman-Markey bill passed by the

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**“...the trouble with offsets highlights an important challenge for carbon ranching: profitability...how can a landowner who desires to mitigate climate change earn a paycheck, without which there will no carbon ranching?”**

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U.S. House of Representatives in 2009, a bill which sought to confront climate change by stimulating private markets.

However, many observers – myself included – have become increasingly skeptical of the offset concept at regional or national scales. Objections to offsets include:

- We need actual net reductions of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> not just the neutralizing offset of a polluter by a sequesterer.
- There are moral and ethical implications to letting polluters redeem themselves with offsets, the way medieval nobles bought indulgences from the Church for their sins (for a powerful parody of this situation see [www.cheatneutral.com](http://www.cheatneutral.com), where philandering adults can buy offsets from monogamous couples so they can keep on cheating).
- It is unrealistic to expect the same system that created the climate problem in the first place – i.e., our current economy and specifically its financial sector – to solve this problem and to do so with the same tools. Furthermore, it is not OK for Wall Street to profit from a problem it helped to create.
- At best, offsets may be illusory; at worst they're fraudulent – thus imperiling the whole purpose of the idea. This concern is captured in an investigative report by the *Christian Science Monitor* published on April 20, 2010, titled “Buying carbon offsets may ease eco-guilt but not global warming.” [19] The investigation found that people buying offsets are getting “vague promises instead of the reductions in greenhouse gases they expect.” They are buying into projects that are never completed, or are paying for ones that would have been done anyway. Mostly they feed shady middlemen and promoters seeking profits from green schemes, said the report's authors. “Carbon offsets are the environmental equivalent of financial derivatives: complex, unregulated, unchecked and – in many cases – not worth

the price,” they write. In a spectacular example, the Vatican was swindled. In 2007, Cardinal Paul Poupard accepted a gold-framed certificate from a company promising to help it become the “first carbon-neutral sovereign state” on the planet. The promised forest in Hungary was never planted. A papal spokesman told the *Monitor* that “the case is being studied to take legal action in order to defend the Vatican's reputation.”

- The monitoring required to quantitatively verify actual and additional (meaning a net increase) CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration in the soil in order to satisfy the marketplace is too complicated, cumbersome, expensive and intrusive for many landowners. Out West, this is an especially sensitive topic, as many ranchers already feel like there are too many people with clipboards walking across their land. If protocols are not considered comprehensible and user friendly by landowners, then skepticism will remain high in a community that already has doubts about climate change generally.

For these reasons and more, offsets and carbon credits may not be the economic engine of the future that so many proponents tout it to be. Nevertheless, the trouble with offsets highlights an important challenge for carbon ranching: profitability. If not offsets, then how can a landowner who desires to mitigate climate change earn a paycheck, without which there will no carbon ranching?

One idea: a more appropriate marketplace might be at the local level. A county government, for example, could help to create a local carbon market to help offset its judicial buildings or schools or prisons. It could possibly do so through its ability to tax, zone and otherwise regulate at the county level. It would still have to deal with some of the other challenges confronting offsets, but at least it would keep the marketplace local.

Another idea: reward landowners financially for meeting sequestration and emissions goals. The

federal government routinely subsidizes rural economic development enterprises that the private marketplace won't touch, such as the current effort to bring high-speed broadband Internet to rural communities. Additionally, the government often provides incentives to businesses for market-based approaches, including corn-based ethanol production, solar power development, and wind technology (and don't forget the federal government's catalyzing role in the birth of the Internet). It would be perfectly logical, therefore, to reward early adopters of carbon ranching with a direct financial payment as a means to wake up traditional markets.

In sum, although the main purpose of A Carbon Ranch is to sequester additional CO<sub>2</sub> in plants and soils, it must take every step possible to reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions it contributes to the atmosphere – with the ultimate goal of becoming a carbon-neutral or even carbon-negative operation.

### The Joy of Co-Benefits

*"Carbon ranching has no downside."* – John Wick, rancher and director of the Marin Carbon Project

In its effort to sequester carbon in soil and reduce emissions, A Carbon Ranch also produces a list of co-benefits that make the whole enterprise even more vital. They include:

- **Local grassfed and organic food.** By managing land for a healthy grass cover, A Carbon Ranch is the natural setting for raising grass-fed livestock, whose environmental and human-health benefits are well-documented. Additionally, the market for organic, grassfed meat is growing steadily, which means this could be a way to monetize climate-friendly beef as an economic strategy.
- **Improved ecosystem services.** In 2005, the United Nations published its Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a global evaluation of ecosystem services on which human well-being and environmental health depend. These services include the provision of food, fresh water, wood, fiber, fuel, and biodiversity; flood, pest and disease regulation; nutrient

cycling, soil stability, biotic integrity, watershed function and photosynthesis; and spiritual, educational, recreational, and aesthetic experiences. According to the assessment, nearly all of these services are in gradual or steep decline. By improving soil structure and grass cover via grazing management, riparian and wetland restoration, tree thinning, open space protection, and no-till farming practices, A Carbon Ranch can contribute substantially to reversing the decline in these essential services.

- **Habitat protection.** In addition to the protection of the open space necessary for wildlife, A Carbon Ranch promotes the coexistence of domestic and wild animal populations. That's because it operates on the principle that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land productive for livestock. Healthy land, in other words, is the basis for healthy relationships between all living things.
- **Rural economic development.** Producing local food, restoring creeks and rangelands, marketing climate-friendly enterprises, and developing local energy will require a great deal of work, and therefore could potentially create a many jobs for rural residents. For example, the number of eroded creeks and wetlands in the Southwest that could be restored, is substantial, which means the potential for employing people in restoration jobs is equally substantial.
- **Maintenance of culture and diversity.** Since A Carbon Ranch involves livestock, horses, roping, branding, as well as farming, irrigating, timber harvesting, wildlife viewing and many other traditional activities, it can strengthen and support local and regional land-based



Grassfed cattle. (Photo by Tamara Gadzia)

cultures. It will require a mixing of innovation with tradition, but this can be a healthy way of rejuvenating a sense of community and cultural continuity.

- **Educational opportunities.** A carbon ranch requires a careful blending of ecology, economics, stewardship, restoration activities, monitoring, collaboration, and innovation, which means it has the potential to become a dynamic site for a wide variety of educational opportunities, including tours, workshops, field trips, Outdoor Classrooms, clinics, and training programs.
- **Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide.** Many people concerned about climate change live in cities or other urban arrangements while most carbon sequestration work will take place in the countryside, which means A Carbon Ranch has a huge potential to bridge the long-standing and expanding gulf that separates urban and rural residents today. In other words, urban can support rural economically, politically and socially, while rural can deliver the climate change mitigation that we all need so urgently.
- **Participation in a local economy.** Much has been written in recent years about the value of local economies. A carbon ranch can help by its emphasis on local food production, energy development and localized restoration activities.
- **Opportunities for the next generation.** If A Carbon Ranch could become a profitable enterprise, then it would undoubtedly become attractive to young people who want to get into (or back to) farming and ranching, restoration or other efforts to fight climate change. Additionally, older farmers and ranchers could be enlisted to mentor the next generation of land managers, especially if they have expertise in one or more of the necessary skills to run A Carbon Ranch.

There are other important co-benefits that carbon ranching can provide, including reconnecting urban residents with a source of their food, softening the effects of drought on landowners, and assisting with the terribly important challenge of feeding a global population that is expected to reach nine billion people by mid-century.

On the first point, not only is human well-being wrapped up with how food is produced— including the issue of carbon footprints and efforts to protect and restore carbon sinks— food is something everyone understands. That means it can play a key educational role in fighting climate change.

“By focusing on food systems, climate action will become more real to people,” write Sara Scherr and Sajal Sthapit in a 2009 report for the WorldWatch Institute. “The status of farmers and land managers will be enhanced as their responsibility as stewards for a stable climate is recognized and rewarded. And society will reconnect in a new way with its ancient roots in the cultivation of land for food.” [20]

On the second point, strategies that combat drought, especially in the arid parts of the developing world, will become critical as the desertifying effects of climate change become more apparent. For many around the globe, this issue will be a matter of life and death.

“Livestock are an irreplaceable source of livelihoods for the poor,” write the authors of the 2010 FAO report cited earlier. “Livestock is the fastest growing sector, and in some countries accounts for 80% of the GDP, in particular in drylands. Seventy percent of the 880 million rural poor people living on less than \$1 per day are at least partially dependent on livestock for their livelihoods and subsequent food security.” [21]

Progressive grassland management, they argue, can increase productivity and food security, provide development opportunities in resource-poor drylands, and reduce impacts of drought and climate change.

On the third point, the issue is simple and profound: How can we feed nine billion people sustainably? In the past, the answer was to bring more and more land into production, especially marginal land (steep, dry or heavily forested). This is less and less an option today for a wide variety of reasons, including urbanization, conservation concerns and erosion. Meanwhile, according to a recent study, the world will require 70-100% more food by 2050 than we produce currently. [22]

One answer, according to this study, is to produce more food with the same amount of land (or less), which they call sustainable intensification and which involves increasing agricultural yields. Too often this becomes an argument for increased genetic engineering of crops or the development of new types of pesticides. But it could also describe the rise in stocking rate of cattle on a ranch that practices herding or another type of intensive management. In any case, it won't be easy, as the authors of the report note. "Any optimism must be tempered by the enormous challenges of making food production sustainable while controlling greenhouse gas emission and conserving dwindling water supplies, as well as meeting... the goal of ending hunger."

That sounds like a job for A Carbon Ranch. None of this will be easy. In fact, the obstacles standing in the way of implementing A Carbon Ranch and sharing its many co-benefits are large, diverse, and discouraging. But is it worth trying anyway? Absolutely. If A Carbon Ranch could it make a difference in the fight against climate change – which I consider the overarching crisis of the 21st century – then I think it must try. The alternative – not trying – means we consign our future to politics, technology and wishful thinking, none of which have made a difference so far.

Remember the old joke about how to eat an elephant? One bite at a time. It is the same with carbon ranching: The only way we can succeed is one acre at a time. Will it be fast enough? Will it make a difference? Will it work? I don't know – no one does. That's because we face an unprecedented future. We live on a planet that has not seen CO<sub>2</sub> levels this high for two million years – almost as long as there have been humans. We face a collective challenge that is literally unimaginable, though with each passing day scientists clear a little bit more of our future's fog, revealing a worrisome picture.

Some see salvation in high technology, including the capture of CO<sub>2</sub> at its source, to be stored un-



Fall branding crew on San Juan Ranch. (Photo by Avery C. Anderson)

derground, or the scrubbing of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere by hundred of thousands of boxcar-sized filtering machines. Unfortunately, these technologies, even if practical, are years away from deployment. And the climate crisis, as evidenced by recent headlines, is happening now.

This leads to a question: What about low technology?

Carbon ranching doesn't need to be invented. It already exists. We know how to grow grass using animals. We've learned how to fix creeks and heal wetlands. We're getting good at producing local grassfed food. We'll figure out how to reduce our carbon footprint, and develop local renewable energy sources profitably. We don't need high technology— we have the miracle of photosynthesis already. What we lack is the will to try something old. Low technology won't save the planet by itself, of course, but it is essential to the quality of life on Earth no matter how much CO<sub>2</sub> exists in the atmosphere. Too often, however, our eyes seem fixed on the stars and our minds dazzled by distant horizons, blinding us to possibilities closer to home. Perhaps we should be looking down, not up.

At the grass and the roots. ☺

[Citations on next page.]



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