Offset Network

Offset Network: Protocol Development Pathway, Guidance for Reviewers

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Background

The core mission of the Offset Network is to enable institutions of higher education to engage students, faculty, staff and their community members at large to collaboratively achieve climate goals. One key way to enable these opportunities is by building the space for climate solution-oriented research to produce novel emission reduction projects and to test these methods. In many ways, higher education can act as a laboratory for these novel projects that not only unlock unique educational opportunities for students and work towards institutional carbon commitments, but also produce viable models to addressing climate change. By developing research within the framework of a carbon offset protocol, these solutions become replicable, project impact is legitimized to count towards voluntary climate commitments, and eventually, these solutions can access carbon financing to further scale their impact. This document outlines the process of protocol submission and review through offsetnetwork.org, and provides guidance for expert reviewers.

Projects that follow protocols developed through the Offset Network can result in Peer-Reviewed Offsets. While these offsets should not be bought or sold, they can be used to offset a portion of the institution's emissions. Visit offsetnetwork.org for more information.

Process Outline

1. Protocol developer (typically a member of a higher education institution) develops a new offset protocol.

2. Protocol developer submits protocol to the Offset Network via Peer Review Committee

3. Protocol undergoes review by at least three experts (a minimum of one project-type expert and one carbon accounting expert)

4. The protocol developer will integrate or address all expert comments (2 rounds of comment and response)

5. The Peer Review Committee signs off on the final protocol. This communication is then posted to OffsetNetwork.org.

6. Presentation of new protocol via webinar and public access to the protocol with space for public commenting. The Offset Network will recognize the technical experts who completed the protocol review.

7. The protocol must be reviewed no less than every 5 years and updated accordingly (repeat steps 3-6).

Details & Instructions for Protocol Reviewers

A member of the Peer Review Committee will act as an intermediary between the protocol developer and the expert reviewers throughout the process. The member of the Peer Review Committee will communicate with you primarily via email, and you should feel free to contact him/her with questions at any point throughout the review process. You may be asked by the Peer Review Committee to complete a Conflict of Interest form before beginning the protocol review.

1. Please provide all comments on the protocol via track changes in **Microsoft Word**.

2. There will be two rounds of review and response (with an approximate timeline agreed upon by Peer Review Committee, protocol developer, and expert reviewers at the start of the process. A suggested target timeline is four weeks for each round of comment and response, however this may vary greatly depending on each individual's availability and the number and implications of comments received. The key is to have clear communication throughout the process). All comments and responses will be recorded and publicly available to ensure transparency.

3. During the first round of review, please identify areas of the protocol that require specific expertise (that you do not have) to review – identifying the potential need to outsource specific components and improve the protocol.

4. If no consensus is reached after two rounds, the Peer Review Committee will review outstanding comments. The Peer Review Committee will determine if the protocol can be approved for use through the Offset Network as is, or if the protocol developer needs to make additional changes to address disagreements.

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General Guidance for Protocol Reviewers

Principles to Inform Approach to Review

i. **Uncertainty Principle:** Projects will always include uncertainty, but the uncertainty must be within reasonable thresholds. It is appropriate to pursue protocol development when:
    1. A project can assure positive climate impact (even if the accuracy of estimating that impact is less precise);
    2. The level of uncertainty is within reasonable bounds, <10% uncertainty of project impact (higher than the voluntary carbon programs, but within acceptable limits because we are trying to enable innovative projects)
        a. ACR has uncertainty calculations that we can use- their limit is 5% (uncertainty for the project scenario is one category)
        b. Other uncertainties are massive, additional
    3. A contribution equal to the level of uncertainty (if <10%) of project impact is made to buffer pools and held until project impact is measurable, at which point the buffer pool contribution may be released.
    4. It is possible to consider projects with >10% uncertainty, but only when in addition to the buffer pool contribution equal to the project's uncertainty an additional uncertainty penalty of 5-10% of project impact (reflective of these highly uncertain projects whose uncertainty is likely more difficult to measure?) is included.

ii. **Conservativeness Principle**: Every attempt through protocol development should be made to ensure that when estimation uncertainty of project impact exists, methodologies utilize approaches that under-credit projects instead of over-crediting.

iii. **Conflict of interest**: If you review the protocol and then your institution assists in subsequent project development this does represent a potential conflict of interest. The risk is not great, however, as a reviewer typically would not recommend a project that is sub-standard to their institution for offset generation. The potential for abusing the role of reviewer does exist, and therefore any reviewers who have intentions of potentially exploring possibilities for their institution to develop projects at some future date must complete and submit a conflict of interest form.

Protocol structure

There are some sections that must be covered by any protocol submitted for review by Offset Network. These include:

a. **Protocol Description**: include protocol scope, intended purpose, and the rationale behind the project impact.
b. Protocol Authors
c. **Definitions:** identify and define key terms used within the protocol.
d. **Eligibility:** project boundaries, sources and types of GHGs applicable via protocol, land eligibility or geographic boundaries of protocol, other eligibility requirements.
e. **Demonstrate High Quality Offsets**: include permanence, additionality, verifiability, enforceability, and real (PAVER) requirements, double counting concerns, and project management plans.
f. **Quantification Methodology**: include determination of baseline scenario, how to calculate project impact and explanation of these methods, and leakage.
g. **Risk Management & Uncertainty**: include buffer pool contributions, management plan considerations, and ways to reduce uncertainty or risk.
h. **Project Monitoring**: relevant project partners involved with monitoring, methods to track project failures that may occur, and timeframe for monitoring.