Offset Network

Offset Network: Protocol Development Pathway
Updated June 2020

Purpose & Overview
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.

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. Develop protocol (work internally within your institution and peer community)

All carbon offset protocols must include sections that identify their approach to defining the project's climate impact and covering the breadth of topics necessary to assure the environmental integrity of the project. Each protocol will be different and depending on the sectoral scope and project type, additional sections may be required. The Offset Network recommends reviewing other protocols of a similar project type or within the same sectoral scope to select appropriate additional protocol sections (beyond those required and listed below).

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.

2. **Submit to the Offset Network via Peer Review Committee**

a. Include information on the Protocol's "Background and Development". Include in this description previous submission to another GHG program (if applicable), the protocol's development pathway or history and how it was created including what financial arrangements and partnerships enabled the project. Also explain why the protocol is pursuing acceptance by the Offset Network.
b. Protocol developer submits list of at least six potential expert reviewers for Peer Review Committee to include in due diligence assessment. The Peer Review Committee will make the ultimate decision regarding the reviewers (and may include experts not identified by the protocol developer).
c. After submission of the protocol and its Background and Development, the Peer Review Committee will conduct due diligence assessing the literature around the project type of the protocol to select diverse expert reviewers to facilitate step 3 and ensure a reasonable level of certainty within the scientific literature on the practice. This process will take up to three weeks.

This may include speaking with an expert to understand the protocol's project context or evaluating accessible and searchable literature. During this due diligence phase and in the process of selecting Expert

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Reviewers, the Peer Review Committee will take into account the following key considerations:

    i. Need to maintain Offset Network's dual goals for high-integrity protocols and enabling greater access to project development. As good arbiters with the stated intention to expand access to carbon offset subject matter, foster innovative approaches, and the testing of potential solutions, it is important to maintain awareness that there will always exist detractors to the novel direction or alternative approaches of proposed Offset Network protocols. This should not be a rationale for excluding a project, rather it is on those performing due diligence to assess the legitimacy of the criticism.

    ii. Ensure that "best possible" science has been applied throughout the protocol.

    iii. Maintain open communication with the project developer.

    iv. Maintain awareness that there is high value to engaging those with differences of opinion, but that at the same time there is always controversy within a scientific topic. In selecting expert reviewers, ensure that they are genuinely committed to achieving climate impact and will not represent a barrier or immovable hurdle to the review process.

3. **Protocol undergoes review by at least three experts.**

Expert protocol review is essential to developing robust and effective protocols, and also provides a key oversight function to ensure the integrity of protocols listed on OffsetNetwork.org. The Peer Review Committee ultimately makes the decision to select three experts from the submitted list by the project developer including at least one expert from each of the below subject areas:

    a. Project type specific experts
    b. Carbon accounting experts

A member of the Peer Review Committee will confirm expert reviewers' availability, and act as an intermediary between the protocol developer and the reviewers throughout the process.

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

Reviewers should provide their comments on the protocol via track changes in Microsoft Word. After each round of review, the protocol developer should merge all comments into one document. This should be distributed to all expert reviewers along with the protocol developer's responses, so that each reviewer can see all comments.

4. **Resolve identified issues; requirement to integrate or address all expert comments.**

The goal here is to foster transparency between the protocol developer and the reviewers, with a member of the Peer Review Committee facilitating this process. There should 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.

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.

5. **The Peer Review Committee signs off on the final protocol. This communication is then posted to OffsetNetwork.org, along with a table of all comments and responses received throughout the review process.**

6. **Presentation of new protocol via webinar and public access to the protocol with space for public commenting. The Peer Review Committee will compile publicly received comments after a period of 3 months, and determine if any warrant response by the protocol developer.**

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

Steady-State Public Commenting

The Offset Network embodies higher education's incremental, iterative approach to knowledge generation in its approach to offset project and protocol creation, and therefore operates in a steady state of 'public commenting'. Adding a required inactive period following expert review is an unnecessary delay in a process that emphasizes document accessibility and public commenting throughout. Should a

comment be received identifying credible and substantial issues with the legitimacy of credits generated through the protocol's instructions, the protocol author must address the issue. Reviewer comments will be posted to OffsetNetwork.org as well as the responses from the protocol's author so as to foster transparency and public commenting.

If the reviewer comments identify a need for revision (and the author is not able to clarify or offer a sufficient alternative to the identified revision), the Peer Review Committee will determine the appropriate recourse for the protocol in this revisionary interim period: either halting project development, excluding projects with particular characteristics that relate to the revision's contents, or allowing projects to be developed but not allowing credit generation until revisions are completed.

Considerations for Identifying Reviewers

Expert reviewers of protocols can be identified by the Protocol Developer and requests can be made through the Offset Network's member network to identify experts. In either scenario, the selection of reviewers should be explained by the Protocol Developer: identifying the expertise they will provide and why they were selected, and by the Reviewers themselves through the completion of a Conflict of Interest form. If possible, Protocol Developers are encouraged to conduct a literature review of the project type research as a component that informs selection of reviewers – the goal here is to select a diverse group of reviewers, potentially explicitly including those publishing different takes on the subject within the literature.

Reference Material:
CAR Climate Forward program materials
Verra Protocol Submission materials