

The Corporate Agenda Behind Carbon Farming

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If you live in Africa and you’ve heard of or experienced a “carbon farming” project, it has likely involved a land grab for a large-scale tree plantation. Across much of the global South, an increasing number of companies are taking over large areas of land to establish tree plantations and claim carbon credits that they can sell on international carbon markets. This is the case in Niger, where the US-based company African Agriculture Inc [recently acquired](#) two 50-year leases over a total of two million hectares to plant pine trees for carbon credits. A similar experience is unfolding in the Republic of Congo, where French energy giant Total is [planting](#) 40,000 hectares of acacia trees for carbon credits, depriving local communities of their farmland for the next 20 years.

But in countries where industrial agriculture dominates, such as the US, Brazil or Australia, “carbon farming” is about tweaking entrenched practices to claim that carbon is being sequestered in the soil and to then sell carbon credits. This [form of “carbon farming”](#) is also now starting to be pushed onto smaller farmers in different parts of the global South, such as India.

A programme promoted by the global seed and pesticide giant Bayer provides a good example of how this entrenched path to “carbon farming” is being used to advance the agendas of agribusiness corporations.

About a decade ago, the notorious pesticide and seed company Monsanto made a controversial take-over of a digital agriculture company called the Climate Corporation. Through that acquisition it developed one of the [first major digital agriculture platforms](#), which is now called Climate FieldView.

FieldView is essentially an app that collects data from satellites and from sensors in farm fields and sensors on tractors and then uses algorithms to advise farmers on their farming practices — when and what to plant, how much pesticide to spray, how much fertiliser to apply, etc. The company [says](#) FieldView is already being used on farms covering over 24 million hectares in the US, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Europe.

In 2020, Bayer (which acquired Monsanto in 2016) launched its Carbon Program in the US. In Europe it’s called the Carbon Initiative, and in Brazil it’s Carbon+.

To be part of Bayer's [Carbon Program](#), farmers have to be enrolled in Bayer's FieldView digital agriculture platform. Bayer then uses the FieldView app to instruct farmers on the implementation of just two practices that are said to sequester carbon in the soils: 1) reduced tillage or no-till farming and 2) the planting of cover crops. Through the app, the company monitors the implementation of these two practices and estimates the amount of carbon that the participating farmers have sequestered. Farmers are then supposed to be paid according to Bayer's calculations and Bayer uses that information to claim carbon credits and sell these in carbon markets.

This past August, Bayer launched a new programme in the US, called [ForGround](#). The main difference with its Carbon Program is that companies can also enrol in ForGround, not just farmers. Upstream companies can use the platform to advertise and offer discounts for [tilling equipment](#), forage seeds and other inputs. But Bayer's big target is the downstream food companies which can use the platform to claim Scope 3 emissions reductions in their supply chains.

The giant poultry company Purdue Farms was the first such company to [announce](#) a collaboration with Bayer's ForGround in September 2022. Under the collaboration, farmers who supply feed grains to Purdue will be enrolled in ForGround so that Purdue can track their carbon footprints and market its highly polluting chicken as "sustainable". Although this is not stated by the companies, another advantage for Purdue will be the in-depth information about its farmer suppliers that it will get access to and that it can use to maximise its profits.

It's not clear if farmers will gain anything from this. The joint [press release](#) says only that farmers "may be compensated for tracking their carbon footprint". On the other hand, farmers could actually be penalised for not enrolling. Those who do not enrol may find themselves unable to sell soybeans and maize to Purdue, or they may be paid less by Purdue for their crops.

Bayer is the big winner here. It gets increasing control over farmers, dictating exactly how they farm and what inputs they use. Getting more farmers to use reduced tillage or no-till is of huge benefit to Bayer. The kind of reduced tillage or no-till promoted by Bayer requires dousing fields with tonnes of its RoundUp (glyphosate) herbicide and planting seeds of its genetically-engineered Roundup resistant soybeans or hybrid maize.

Bayer also intends to profit from the promotion of cover crops. The very month that it launched ForGround, it took majority ownership of a seed company developing a gene edited cover crop, called [CoverCress](#). Seeds of CoverCress will be sold to farmers who are enrolled in ForGround and the crop will be sold as a biofuel.

You can see in the evolution of Bayer's programmes that, for corporations, carbon farming is all about increasing their control within the food system. It's certainly [not about sequestering carbon](#). Bayer's programme has a short term focus, as it only requires a 10 year guarantee of sequestration. It also has a very low level of verifiability, as checks will be carried out mainly from a distance, through estimates based on data collected by the FieldView app, not regular soil tests. And it is not about generating a new revenue stream for farmers, either. As we can see with the move to ForGround, any benefits are going to go to Bayer and other corporations.

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Featured image: Monsanto Lasso herbicide to be sprayed on food crops. [Source: Wikimedia Commons/USDA]

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