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HD **Mukinbudin farmer cashes in on carbon**
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CARBON farming is regarded by many farmers as a proverbial pie-in-the-sky.

But WA-based **company** Carbon Conscious is gaining traction with the concept as part of a world-wide push to offset carbon emissions by sequestering carbon.

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By the end of last year, the **company** had planted more than 22 million mallee trees in 18,000 hectare on 30 properties through the WA Wheatbelt.

And in 2013 it became the first **company** to be granted Australian Carbon Credits (ACCUs) from a WA reforestation project.

Last week, Mukinbudin farmer Stephen Sprigg, who was the first farmer in WA to enter into a share farm agreement with Carbon Conscious, received his first cheque from the **company**, placing a tangible value on carbon sequestration.

He was paid \$23 a metric tonne, which is the Federal Government's fixed price under the previous Labor Government's Carbon Farming Initiative.

Mr Sprigg has a 450ha oil mallee share farm plantation yielding more than 7t/ha of sequestered carbon and quick maths shows a return of more than \$18,000 a year (25 per cent share).

Effectively all Mr Sprigg has done for that income is to excise unproductive land from his cropping program and keep an eye on it, while also gaining stock grazing benefits.

Carbon Conscious is responsible for all the administrative costs, including mapping, **site** preparation, plantation establishment, weed control, monitoring insects and disease and dealing with local and national government authorities, including dreaded form-filling.

It's not a get-rich-quick scheme but there are long term benefits which cannot easily be extrapolated into dollar value.

According to Mr Sprigg, he started negotiations with Carbon Conscious in 2007 with a focus more on the longer term environmental benefits than on monetary return.

"We had land that was not economic for cropping and no good for stocking because of erosion risks," he said. "We took a more long term view that looked at the benefits of reforesting the country, including mitigating salinity issues and improving the sustainability of our **property**."

"And the return we're getting from the oil mallee plantation is a good return for us on land that would realistically continue to denude.

"We couldn't hope to get that sort of return every year from cropping because the trees can handle prolonged drought periods better.

"If the (carbon) price drops I take the view the land is improving because trees are the silent workers to reduce wild erosion, suck the salt level down and provide stock feed from grass and herbage understorey.

"In the first five years we have been running a stocking rate of 2DSE and the sheep clean up the weeds and reduce fire risks while feeding under and around the trees.

"The plantation also is fantastic for lambing and we're finding the sheep are less stressed with nest effects provided by the oil mallees.

"We shear twice a year to achieve the right staple length and generally stock health is excellent.

"We've already had conversations with overseas wool buyers telling them what we are doing and they are very keen to hear our story of an ecologically sustainable and ethical production system.

"In their environmentally-sensitive markets it's a good news story to relate to customers that the wool they are buying comes from producers who are integrating wool-growing with the environment.

"There's a lot of shooting in the dark about carbon farming because it's so new and everybody is on a learning curve," Mr Sprigg said. "But I don't have any doubts that planting native perennials can only be a good thing, particularly for the sustainability of our land.

"It has been a long road but it's proving to be worthwhile, financially as well as environmentally.

While their remains speculation about the Federal Government's intentions on carbon farming, particularly as it moves to axe the carbon tax, industry players are confident Australia will be involved in an emissions trading scheme.

Europe has been operating an emissions trading scheme for the past 15 years and the US and Chinese governments are keen proponents, with China already holding trials.

The Federal Government is seen as dragging the chain, albeit, with a view to instigating a direct action and emissions reduction fund.

But potential customers are waiting for legislation to be passed.

Carbon Conscious commercial manager Anthony Fitzgerald, said his company was comfortable there would be a price for carbon into the future.

"We already have 15 year carbon capture contracts with BP and Origin Energy, and a number of businesses, including City of Perth, RAC(WA), and Homeloans, which buy the rights to an allocation of trees planted in a carbon-capture forest," he said.

"ACCUs are delivered to BP and Origin and we also sell into the open market.

"After July this year, the Federal Government is likely to become a customer via the Emissions Reduction Scheme."

According to Mr Fitzgerald, Carbon Conscious sees a future where it will partner with more landholders who want part of their holding planted to a perennial species as part of their approach to environmental management.

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