

Using Carbon Finance to Advance Self-Determination



THE MISSISSIPPI BAND OF CHOCTAW INDIANS FOREST CARBON PROJECT

PROJECT OVERVIEW

25,230 acres of softwood and hardwood forest in Mississippi

Project Proponent: Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

Project Developer: National Indian Carbon Coalition and SIG Carbon

Baseline: Even-aged, short-rotation management to maximize revenue

Activity: Longer rotations and selective harvest to enhance biodiversity values and cultural benefits from the forest, using the carbon revenue to fund expansion of Choctaw Central complex, which will house a middle and high school

ACR716: 256,524 tonnes CO₂e of verified carbon emissions reduced and removed from 2020-2023

MOTIVATED TO CONTROL THEIR OWN DESTINY

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians have long been guided by the doctrine of self-determination. They have inhabited the region around Nanih Waiya – a massive earthen mound and cave that marks the birthplace of the Tribe – for thousands of years. As Mississippi's only federally recognized Tribe, the Choctaw currently count over 11,000 enrolled Band members with 35,000 acres in the east central part of the state. As an independent nation, the Choctaw have worked hard to control their own destiny.

Self-determination guides the Tribe's economic, educational and community development, including its forest management. Surrounded by pine forests in the uplands and red maple, hickory and elm in the bottomlands, the



PHOTO BY STEPHEN TAGLIERI FOR NICC



PHOTO BY MISSISSIPPI BAND OF CHOCTAW INDIANS

Tribe has been managing their forests since time immemorial to support Tribal culture and their way of life. Hickory branches are used to produce stickball sticks and for clubs to hunt rabbit, racoon and other small game. Swamp cane is made into blowguns for hunting birds. Drums, central to all community events, are made from hickory and gum trees, as well as rawhide from white tail deer. Tribal resources are managed carefully to steward their culture.

Now, the Tribe is using their forest in a new way, developing a carbon project to help fund the expansion of their high school.

SELLING CARBON CREDITS TO EXPAND EDUCATION

When it was first developed in 1963, the Choctaw Tribal Schools system was designed to serve 400 students.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN TAGLIERI FOR NICC

Today, it is the largest Tribally controlled school system in the nation, with 741 students relying on the aging facilities; in the future more than 1,200 students are expected. Modular buildings without bathrooms, many with crumbling ceilings and leaky roofs, are currently used to meet the excess need.

Things are changing, however, due in part to a forest carbon project. Construction is underway for a new 280,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art facility that will serve generations of Choctaw students.

To launch this initiative, in 2021 they formed a partnership with the National Indian Carbon Coalition (NICC), an Indigenous-led nonprofit that helps Tribal Nations and individual Indian landowners develop carbon projects. Formed by the Indian Land Tenure Foundation and the Intertribal Agriculture Council, the Coalition views Tribal carbon projects as opportunities to preserve Tribal land ownership while returning profits to Tribal economies and communities.

“It’s an honor to partner with the Choctaw Tribe to advance their goals through a carbon project that is promoting forest conservation and funding expanded education,” said Bryan Van Stippen, Program Director of the National Indian Carbon Coalition and a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin.

The partnership offers the Choctaw Tribe an important step toward its goal of self-determination.



PHOTO: CHIEF CYRUS BEN

“This is an exceptional program to benefit our members and the environment. Land stewardship has always been important to our Tribe, and this emerging market gives us an invaluable opportunity to continue to protect and preserve our forested tribal lands and address our children’s educational needs.”

– Tribal Chief Cyrus Ben

STORING ADDITIONAL CARBON THROUGH IMPROVED FOREST MANAGEMENT

Extending across more than 25,000 acres of forestland, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Forest Carbon Project relies on *Improved Forest Management (IFM)* to reduce and remove atmospheric carbon emissions. By lengthening the time between harvests and using more selective management, the Tribe is sequestering more carbon in its forests, relative to a baseline of more-intensive management supported by historical harvest levels, market capacity, and even-aged management plans approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians offers a powerful example of the importance of Indigenous forest stewardship in North America.”

– Dr. Kurt Krapfl, ACR Director of Forestry

Harvesting forest products on Tribal lands has been historically crucial due to Choctaw values associated with wildlife, along with the need for revenue and tribal employment opportunities. Typical forest management in the region involves short rotation clearcuts and thinnings. With the carbon project, the Tribe is pursuing a balanced approach that supports forest health and carbon benefits, while allowing for limited harvesting to contribute wood products to the local economy. By committing to maintain and increase forest carbon stocks for at least 40 years, the Tribe will advance climate goals while also preserving long-term timber value and the associated jobs.

And the funding generated by the sale of carbon credits will help finance the building of a new Choctaw Central complex, which will house a middle and high school.

“This emerging market gives us an invaluable opportunity to continue to protect and preserve our forested tribal lands and address our children’s educational needs,” said Chief Cyrus Ben.

INVESTING IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF TRIBAL LEADERS

Thanks to anticipated revenue from the sale of carbon credits over the next twenty years, the Tribe has broken ground on the school expansion, which is expected to be completed for the 2026-27 school year. The new campus, located on 35 acres of Tribal land, will include a two-story modern building to house both middle and high school students and a gymnasium, dormitory, and career technical building.

To advance its goal of self-determination, the Choctaw Tribe is developing a carbon project that conserves its forests, culture, and biodiversity, and also invests in its next generation of leaders. “Education is of paramount importance to our Tribe,” noted Chief Cyrus Ben.

For more information about the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Forest Carbon Project, visit the [National Indian Carbon Coalition](#) or [ACR](#).