South of Scotland tech challenge seeks carbon capture breakthrough

Wednesday 16 June, 2021

Four conservation and community development organisations in the South of Scotland have launched a challenge to companies to find an innovative technological solution to tackling climate change through land use.

A partnership between conservation charity the John Muir Trust, the Langholm Initiative community development trust, rural development charity Southern Uplands Partnership and the economic development agency South of Scotland Enterprise aims to discover how technology can help landowners better understand the potential for carbon storage on their land and so inform land-use decisions.

They have put the challenge out to tender through the Scottish Government's CivTech programme, which exists to invite entrepreneurs and start-ups to help solve challenges faced by public sector organisations.

Although data on the potential for carbon storage on different habitats does exist in various forms – for example in satellite data – it often cannot be accessed or processed in a meaningful way by land managers.

The successful candidates will then be placed into a tech accelerator programme to explore promising ideas that will be piloted on the new 5,200-acre Tarras Valley Nature Reserve on Langholm Moor in Dumfries and Galloway. Successful trials at Langholm could inform wider adoption of the technology across Scotland and beyond. The resulting products and services will be revealed in March 2022.

The vast nature recovery area at Langholm was created in March 2021, after one of the most ambitious community fundraising campaigns ever seen – supported by the John Muir Trust, South of Scotland Enterprise and others – led to the South of Scotland's largest community buyout.

The reserve has a diversity of habitats including globally important peatlands and native woodlands, which each have different carbon capture and storage potential, biodiversity importance and economic opportunities.

New technology could, for example, more accurately assess how to ensure the right native trees are in the right place through either planting or natural regeneration, or inform decisions around actions such as peatland restoration or conservation grazing.

"With the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve land owned by the community for the first time in its history, we want it to be an inspiring case study for tackling the nature and climate crises while supporting community regeneration. This exciting tech challenge could see the South of Scotland lead the way in pioneering innovative carbon capture breakthroughs," says Langholm Initiative Trustee Kevin Cumming.

A winning solution to the challenge would empower landowners and managers to promote and implement nature-based solutions to the climate crisis that would also support livelihoods and the economy.

For the John Muir Trust, who in early 2021 promoted the concept of a 'natural land carbon tax' to help incentivise and fund more nature-based solutions to the climate crisis across Scotland, this is a big step.

"Scotland has won praise worldwide for its ambitious climate change targets. In this year of COP26, it

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can once again show global leadership by bold action to bring about progressive land use for the benefit of climate, communities and nature," says Mike Daniels, Head of Policy and Land for the John Muir Trust.

Indeed, the South of Scotland is well placed to take the lead in setting ambitious targets for green recovery and a greener economy.

Jane Morrison-Ross, Chief Executive of South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) said: "SOSE is delighted to be part of the CivTech 6 programme and support the goal of bringing technological innovation to the South of Scotland.

"We look forward to working with the Langholm Initiative, John Muir Trust and Southern Uplands Partnership on the Challenge to look at how technology can help landowners measure the potential for carbon storage on their land, and also better inform land-use decisions. Natural Capital is hugely important to the South of Scotland.

"The tender marks the start of this exciting programme and offers a fantastic opportunity for tech companies to secure a grant to explore innovative and groundbreaking ideas."

CivTech is embedded in the Digital Directive of the Scottish Government, and operates by offering a series of funded tendered annual 'challenges' to industry to solve problems through a competitive process. Challenge 6 is for 2021/22 and launched on 14 June 2021. Tech companies are invited to tender, and can do so by going to the CivTech website civtechalliance.org/civtech-6.

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