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Carbon offsets far from settled

Ability to counter one's carbon dioxide emissions can feel good and do good, depending on the questions asked

BY DAWN WEINBERGER

Pamplin Media Group, Mar 13, 2007 (4 Reader comments)

Travel Web sites make it seem simple. Book a ticket, throw in a few extra bucks and ... ta-da! Your portion of that atmosphere-polluting flight from PDX to JFK is suddenly "carbon neutral."

In a bid to help out the ecosystem, frequent fliers and daily commuters are getting on the carbon-neutral bandwagon in droves by purchasing "carbon offsets."

An offset, though intangible to the individual, helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions by compensating for the individual's carbon dioxide emissions. Some offset a trip or two; others, such as Al Gore, claim to offset their emissions by the year.

Offsets "are like debits and credits," says Jeff Bissonnette, organizing director for the Fair and Clean Energy Coalition in downtown Portland. "You are trying to keep your debits and credits in balance, and you have either a net decrease or net increase in good things happening for the planet."

Making the actual purchase might seem like a no-brainer – visit a Web site, enter your credit card number, click and you're done.

But the truth is carbon offsets are a lot like every other product in the marketplace. Quality varies from vendor to vendor. Some offer great value and some, well, you might be better off simply making a donation to the charity of your choice.



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The first step is actually understanding what happens when money changes hands.



The offset provider “uses the money they get (to) invest in tree planting projects and other similar projects that take the place of the environmental impact,” Bissonnette says.



For example, an offset purchased through the local nonprofit Climate Trust might help preserve a native forest in the Northwest, or it might help with rainforest restoration in Ecuador.



Does that mean there is literally a tree out in the Ecuadorean rainforest with Joe Offset Buyer’s name on it?



Not exactly. But Climate Trust does take the funds from Joe’s purchase and puts them toward replanting efforts, or one of several other causes – including one project that will help reduce carbon dioxide emissions at truck stops by allowing drivers to plug in their trucks at night rather than leave them idling.



Unfortunately, customers do not get to choose how their donations are distributed.



Organizations like Climate Trust generally are happy to take donations of any amount. But because the idea is to actually offset one’s own carbon output, most providers post offset calculators on their Web sites.



The calculators will tell how much money to invest in offsets based on factors such as what type of car the contributor drives, the size of their home and how many hours are spent in flight each year.



For someone with an average-size home, family sedan and small truck and who flies approximately 36 hours per year, \$275 annually will offset the 23 tons of carbon dioxide emitted, according to Climate Trust’s calculator.

However, the dollar amount could differ from that calculated by another organization.

The difficult part is determining whether to buy through a local offset provider, an international one, a for-profit, a nonprofit or a third party (Expedia.com, Travelocity and even Dell Computers sell offsets along with airfare or computer purchases).

Certification’s on the way

Portland information technologies consultant Dave Dyk made his choice impulsively.

He purchased offsets for his personal and business travel through Terrapass, a San Francisco-based for-profit provider. Though he is not unhappy with Terrapass, he admits to buying the offsets on “the spur of the moment,” without really thinking it through.

“I did not really do a lot of research up front,” Dyk says. “And it sounds like there isn’t really a lot of certification.”

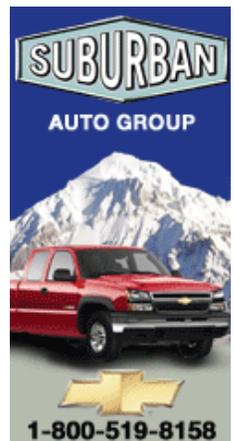
Dyk, who says he’ll evaluate offset providers more carefully when he makes his next purchase, is right. The government does not regulate carbon offsets. Some providers, like Terrapass, do hire third-party auditors on their own, but auditing is not a requirement.

Adam Stein of Terrapass thinks the industry is best positioned to monitor itself: “Given how tiny the voluntary carbon market is (less than \$5 million annually in the U.S.) and given that the industry is already pushing ahead aggressively with the development of quality standards, it’s hard to see the



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need for regulation right now. There are still a number of unresolved policy questions related to carbon offsets, and I'd rather see industry participants try to sort them out than regulators."

Other industry insiders say that regulation, standards and auditing are sorely needed.

To that end, the Center for Resource Solutions, a national nonprofit that strives to create demand for and supply of renewable energy resources, is in the process of creating a certification program for offsets.

It already offers certification for providers of renewable energy certificates (e.g., the Bonneville Environmental Foundation's green tags) through its Green-E program, according to the company's communications director, Sarah Krasley.

"We want to bring the same credibility to (carbon offsets)," she says.

Stein's Terrapass voluntarily submits to third-party audits.

He says that the "Center for Resource Solutions audits our marketing language to make sure that we're not making any false or misleading claims. They require that we include a product content label with every purchase so that the customer knows exactly where the reductions are coming from. They review our sales data to ensure that we actually are purchasing the carbon that our customers have paid us for. And they audit our purchases to make sure they meet the quality standard that we have promised."

Report gives some guidance

Trexler Climate and Energy Services, a Portland consulting firm that specializes in climate-change risk management, recently compiled a report called "A Consumer's Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers."

The guide identifies eight providers that the firm considers the cream of the crop, says President Mark C. Trexler. The list includes the aforementioned Climate Trust, as well as two other U.S.-based providers, NativeEnergy and Sustainable Travel/MyClimate.

The other recommended providers are based in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany.

The providers were evaluated based on several factors ranging from how they select offsets to their commitment to educating consumers on carbon dioxide emissions and global warming.

"(We) are trying to give consumers a feel for what they could reasonably assume they are accomplishing" by purchasing offsets, Trexler says.

Trexler's influence should only grow. As of March 1, the company was acquired by EcoSecurities, a leading firm in the climate-change field worldwide, focusing on carbon offset projects.

Trexler now is the director of EcoSecurities Global Consulting Services and says his new role will allow him to cover more ground than in the past and help businesses and individuals feel confident that their dollars are being spent wisely.

Trexler's guide alerts consumers to potential red flags. For instance, a provider should never sell an individual offset more than once.

Even though an offset is not tangible, each individual offset is tied to a particular percentage of a specific amount of carbon reduction in a specific carbon-reduction project.

Therefore, if an organization sold one offset for \$10 from a wind farm – it would be unethical for them to sell the exact same offset to another customer.

And, offsets should be attached to specific projects (such as Climate Trust's truck stop initiative) – if they aren't, think twice.

Green tags help pay it forward, energywise

If you're turned off by carbon offsets, there's another option to counteract greenhouse gases: green tags.

A carbon offset compensates for an individual's carbon emissions. A green tag, on the other hand, is an investment in environmental resources, explains Jeff Bissonnette of the Fair and Clean Energy Coalition.

Generally, the number of green tags an individual purchases is based on the amount of energy consumed by said person (rather than his or her estimated carbon emissions).

Funds are routed to a variety of renewable energy projects, such as wind farms and solar power plants.

Consumers can purchase green tags directly through organizations like the Bonneville Environmental Foundation (www.b-e-f.org) or via a third party, such as Portland General Electric (which adds the charge to monthly utility bills).

Right questions make a good buy

Here are seven questions to ask providers of carbon offsets.

If an offset provider can't, or won't, provide a satisfactory answer to these questions it is probably best to steer clear.

- Do your offsets come from specific projects?
- Do you use an objective standard to ensure the benefits of the offsets you sell?
- How do you prove that the projects in your portfolio could not have happened without customers' purchase of carbon offsets?
- Have your offsets been validated against a third-party standard by a credible source?
- Do you sell offsets that will gain in value over time?
- Can you demonstrate that the same offsets are not sold again to multiple buyers?
- What are you doing to educate buyers about global warming?

Source: Trexler Climate and Energy Services

Find out more

Online resources

- Download A Consumer's Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers at www.cleanair-coolplanet.org
- Tally your carbon output by entering simple data into a calculator at

www.carboncounter.org

- Offset provider Climate Trust, www.climatetrust.org, is locally based and recommended by experts.

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