

Take My Emissions, Please

Options Expand for Consumers To Offset Their Energy Use; Where Do the Payments Go?

By LAUREN TARA LACAPRA March 1, 2007; Page D1



Calling herself an environmentalist "in a lazy sort of a way," Jen Sader pays about \$6 more on her monthly bills from Bowling Green Municipal Utilities to put toward renewable energy. She opts for paperless bank statements and paid extra to offset carbon emissions for a flight she booked on Expedia.com. "All you have to do is click this box and pay \$6 -- why not?" says Ms. Sader, a 36-year-old graduate student in Toledo, Ohio.



The CarbonNeutral Company

CarbonNeutral's wind turbines in New Zealand for renewable energy.

With a winter that brought snow to Tucson, Ariz., and 70-degree weather to New York City -- along with an Academy Award for the global-warming documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" -- climate change has become more ingrained in the public consciousness. Not everyone may be willing to overhaul their lives to accommodate the environment, but more people are opting for the rising number of options offered by companies to neutralize their "carbon footprints," meaning the amount of energy they consume.

Most carbon-offset programs require consumers to make small payments that in turn go to programs that create renewable energy or absorb carbon dioxide to counteract emissions. But while the thought of offsetting carbon dioxide is a nice gesture, it's debatable whether the small donations make a significant impact. Some companies, such as [AT&T Inc.](#) and [Bank of America Corp.](#), offer to donate money toward tree-plantings or forest conservation for those who opt for paperless statements or bills. The average global citizen emits 4.5 tons of carbon dioxide per year, according to Cool Air-Clean Planet, a nonprofit group that researches ways to fight global warming. (The average U.S. citizen: 21 tons.) A grown tree, meanwhile, can absorb only three to 15 pounds of carbon dioxide per year, according to Tufts Climate Initiative at Tufts University.

Counteracting Your Carbon

Some carbon-offset companies that invest in renewable energy, energy efficiency and reforestation projects.

Group/site	Sample project	For profit?	Price per ton of CO2 offset
Carbonfund.org	Providing solar energy for low-income families in the Chicago area.	No	\$5.50
DrivingGreen.com	Converting methane from farm-animal waste into renewable energy.	Yes	\$8.00
TerraPass	Purchasing carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange	Yes	\$10.00
NativeEnergy	Funding wind turbine projects in Native American and Alaska Native communities	Yes	\$12.00
myclimate	Constructing solar greenhouses in the Himalayas so that produce does not have to be flown there	No	\$18.00
CarbonNeutral	Promoting energy-efficient lighting in Jamaica's tourism sector, particularly hotels.	Yes	\$18.40

Source: Tufts Climate Initiative; the companies.

CARBON ECONOMY • [See photos from](#) renewable energy projects around the globe.

• [How small U.S. farms](#) are benefiting from sales of carbon credits.

Skeptical consumers are also wondering whether the programs are really offsetting their carbon footprints, or whether they're meant to just rid them of guilt. Or worse, some suspect the programs are lining the pockets of companies who don't advertise them as profitable, or that companies are using them primarily to boost their image, not to help the environment. Several farms and wind farms that receive money from these sites verified that the policies listed on the sites have been followed. Some offset programs are not as successful as others, the farm owners said, but that has more to do with construction delays and production issues and is not because the concept is flawed.

Experts say the key thing to keep in mind is this: Buyer beware. Those purchasing offsets should research a company's projects, procedures, partnerships and verifications on their Web sites or by calling before handing over money, according to Tufts Climate Initiative, which aims to counteract climate change and released a report for consumers and businesses interested in investing in carbon neutrality.

Reputable companies will be transparent about their operations, listing on their Web sites the projects they support, how much renewable energy they create and how much money goes toward them. They will also list in detail all verifications and audits they receive.

Many Internet sites have sprung up that make it simple to purchase carbon offsets. Visitors can calculate the carbon emissions of road trips, flights or homes, then donate the cost to the sites, which fund renewable-energy projects. Such methods are affordable enough for most people -- about \$9 for a trans-Atlantic flight and \$50, on average, for a year's worth of driving through a site called TerraPass.

Kimberley Burchett, a 30-year-old software developer in Brookline, Mass., drove 120 miles a day last year to attend Brown University, and paid \$40 to "neutralize" her Toyota Camry's annual emissions. Commuting by car was "environmentally irresponsible, but taking the train wasn't convenient and moving to Providence wasn't an option," says Ms. Burchett. "So I figured out how many additional miles I'd be driving, and bought a TerraPass to offset them."



Alden Hathaway/EcoPower Programs
A solar-energy project by nonprofit group Carbonfund at a hospital in Rakai, Uganda.

TerraPass, a for-profit company, buys carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange, as well as renewable energy credits from wind farms nationwide. It also funds biomass projects, which create energy by capturing methane from manure. Travelers can also choose "eco-options" with one click when booking vacations. Expedia.com and Travelocity.com teamed up with outside companies to let customers pay extra to offset their travel emissions. On SkiGreen.com, visitors can buy "green tags" to offset ski trips, and find ski resorts that support renewable energy.

Clif Bar Inc., an organic health-food company, sells \$2 "Cool Tags" at concerts, festivals and sporting events, whose proceeds go toward offsetting carbon emissions. It began selling the tags in mid-2005 and sold 1,500 through the end of that year. In 2006, it sold 8,000 tags. "We know that buying just one \$2 cool tag -- a tag offsets about 200 miles worth of driving -- is not a major contribution," says Elysa Hammond, the company's ecologist. However, she says, "people are very willing to make an easy first step." Bigger U.S. companies have started "going green" as well. CarbonNeutral, an offset company based in the U.K., says it has over 200 corporate clients and has seen increasing interest from U.S. companies in the past three months.

Certain [Citigroup](#) Inc. units finance a tree-planting and [AT&T](#) Inc. donates 50 cents to the National Arbor Day Foundation for customers who choose to receive online statements instead of paper ones. [Dell](#) Inc. announced a partnership last month with two environmental groups to plant trees for consumers who pay \$2 per notebook or \$6 per PC to neutralize their carbon footprints. Some energy companies also offer consumers the option to tack on a few dollars to utility bills each month for reforestation and renewable-energy programs.

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