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How to find the best carbon offsets

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Once considered a gimmick, carbon offsets have moved to the front lines in the fight against global warming.

If you were underwhelmed when carbon offsets were first offered to the public a few years ago, take a second look. The carbon offsets industry has expanded and matured, addressing many concerns. It's a simple concept. Carbon offsets target carbon dioxide (CO₂), the major "greenhouse gas" contributing to global warming. In most cases, individuals or families first use a Web site to calculate the rough amount of CO₂ produced by their home, car, air travel or all three.

Then, to offset the amount of greenhouse gases produced, you pay a prescribed fee (usually less than \$100 a year) to support projects that reduce, prevent or absorb those gases. These projects include wind farms, solar installations, methane recovery and tree-planting. If you offset your CO₂ emissions



Kristopher Lee / The Seattle Times

Green resources

Green-e offset certifications: www.green-e.org

Gold Standard offset label: www.cdmgoldstandard.org

David Suzuki Foundation: www.davidsuzuki.org

NetGreen: www.achievenet-green.com

Bonneville Environmental Foundation Green Tags: www.bonnevilleenvironmental.org

completely, you become "carbon neutral."

greentagsusa.org

Carbon offsets still have many detractors.

Seattle City Light green power options: www.seattle.gov/light/green/greenpower

Likened to indulgences for sinners in the 16th century, they have been depicted as a way for people to keep being wasteful and just throw

Puget Sound Energy Green Power: www.pse.com/solutions/foryourhome

money at the problem. Critics envision a guy driving a Hummer saying, "It's OK; I bought carbon offsets."

But many folks live a reasonably "green" lifestyle and would still like to do more to reduce global warming. Carbon offsets — and their cousin, green power — make that possible.

To get the most out of these useful tools, follow these tips:

Peek behind the curtain. Don't accept claims of carbon-offset providers at face value. Ask questions: Who are their partners and endorsers? Do they undergo independent audits to confirm that the money helps the right projects? How do their prices compare with other providers? Which industry standards do they use? Respected certification programs include Green-e and the Gold Standard, both operated by nonprofits.

No double-dipping. Make sure a carbon-offset provider's projects offer what is known in the industry as "additionality." In other words, they should not be projects that would have happened anyway without the funding from carbon offsets (such as projects mandated by a government). Also seek assurances that your program does not have a related problem, "double-counting," where two or more organizations claim the same emissions reduction.

Think twice about trees. While they may help the environment in other ways, tree-planting or reforestation projects are the most controversial types of carbon-offset projects. Trees absorb CO₂, but scientists disagree on the effectiveness of tree-planting to reduce global warming. Issues with carbon offsets for tree-planting projects include "their lack of permanence, and the fact that these projects do not address our dependence on fossil fuels," according to the David Suzuki Foundation, a Vancouver, B.C.-based environmental nonprofit.

Look in your own backyard. When carbon-offset providers or projects have Northwest roots, you may have more of a connection and greater accountability. Northwest-based providers include NetGreen, a Seattle for-profit corporation, and the Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF), a nonprofit headquartered in Portland. BEF-funded projects include six wind farms in Washington and Oregon.

Power up. You can also "think globally and act locally" by joining the green power programs offered by local utilities. Similar to carbon offsets, these programs allow customers to pay a few dollars extra on each bill to support renewable energy projects.

Seattle City Light has two programs: Green Up, where customers buy green power for a portion of their electricity, and Green Power, which uses extra customer payments to support more than 20 solar-electricity demonstration projects at Seattle schools and other public locations.

Puget Sound Energy also boasts a thriving residential Green Power program that purchases renewable energy and funds demonstration projects, including a solar-panel installation at the State Capitol in Olympia.

First things first. Before you invest in carbon offsets or green power, make sure you've done all you can to reduce your environmental impact: Drive less, insulate your home, install energy-efficient appliances and buy less stuff. Carbon offsets will never replace good old-fashioned conservation. And you'll save money twice, by living a greener, more-efficient lifestyle and by having less to offset.

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