



The Oregonian

Global warming fight brings local victories

Oregonians benefit as the state leads in offsetting greenhouse gases

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MICHAEL MILSTEIN

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Next time you drive down Southeast Division, Southeast McLoughlin, North Greeley or any of more than 15 other busy roads in and around Portland, your car will burn less gasoline and pump out less greenhouse gas.

That's because a company that built a power plant in Eastern Oregon paid \$533,000 to synchronize the traffic signals. Now cars spend less time sitting, engines idling, at red lights.

It's one way efforts to control global warming are already changing your life, without you noticing. As governments clamp down on greenhouse gases, more change is on the way.

The signal re-timing is called an offset: Reducing carbon dioxide from cars in Portland helps offset the same gas emitted by Avista Utilities' natural gas-fired power plant near Boardman.

Oregon in 1997 became the first state to make new power plants control or offset emissions, and the order has pumped millions of dollars into reforestation and energy efficiency projects statewide. It has made Portland a national -- and international -- clearinghouse for power companies in need of offsets and others with offsets to offer.

Altogether the traffic signal adjustment saves drivers about 1.6 million gallons of gas a year that, if burned, would inject more than 15,000 extra metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, adding to global warming.

Car owners also enjoy a green payoff of about \$3.5 million a year they no longer have to spend on gasoline.

But that's just the start. Offsets will become much more common as utility companies face wider demands to compensate for greenhouse gases that their plants vent to the sky.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski last month joined four other Western governors in moving toward regional emissions limits that may require offsets, and a coalition of Northeast states is on the verge of capping emissions from power plants.

Many utility companies -- including Portland General Electric -- want nationwide greenhouse gas limits so they don't have to juggle a web of different state rules. Any national strategy would probably set caps on emissions and then require companies to keep their emissions within the caps. They could do that by controlling what they release, paying for offsets to balance their emissions or by buying credits from other companies that emit less.

People can buy offsets on their own to compensate for the greenhouse gases that they and their families emit by driving, cooking and heating. But those only nibble around the edges of what a mandatory national system would do.

Although power plants are far from the only source of greenhouse gases, they're one of the biggest and easiest targets of controls. It's generally cheaper for them to pay for projects such as the traffic signal work than to control or capture carbon dioxide at their plants.

That means more money will probably flow to offset projects in Oregon and across the country as utilities and other industries build up credit so they're prepared for coming regulations.

Offsets in Oregon have so far included:

The traffic signal re-timing -- so successful it will soon be expanded to include other streets in the Portland area.

Planting trees, creating new forest that absorbs carbon dioxide. Trees are now growing on plots across the state.

Upgrades at the Blue Heron Paper Co. mill in Oregon City, increasing the amount of recycled paper going into its projects and reducing energy use (funded by Calpine Corp. to offset emissions from a power plant in Hermiston).

Buying wind power to replace electricity that would have been produced by burning fossil fuels.

Portland has quietly become a central brokerage for offsets. The Climate Trust, a Portland nonprofit organization, first formed to help power plants meet the Oregon requirement, but now is handling offsets from Europe to Ecuador.

Just this month, The Climate Trust announced the largest-ever U.S. request for new offset projects. They could include anything from planting trees to improving building insulation. Five major utilities from across the country are paying for the offsets because they expect to need them as greenhouse gas requirements develop.

"The situation has changed dramatically in the last six months," said Mark Trexler, a Portland consultant who helps companies prepare for greenhouse regulations.

The European Union has started a cap-and-trade system to try to control carbon dioxide emissions, driving some European companies to fund offsets. The concept is that it doesn't matter where carbon dioxide is reduced -- as long as it's reduced -- so some of that money has even flowed to the United States.

For example, European companies have put up money through The Climate Trust -- the amount is confidential -- to install plug-ins at truck stops in Oregon beginning this month. Soon truckers will be able to connect to the outlets, powering their cabs with electricity instead of keeping their engines running, burning fuel and emitting carbon dioxide.

But the market in the United States is so rudimentary that there aren't yet clear standards for offsets.

"It's a Wild West out there," said Sean Clark, director of offset projects at The Climate Trust. "The supply of proposals (for offsets) is not limited. The supply of high-quality proposals is limited."

What makes an offset high quality is assurance that it actually reduces carbon dioxide beyond what otherwise would have been. In other words, offset buyers want to make sure they're getting what they pay for. They don't want to pay to plant trees on clear-cut land where they would have been planted anyway, for example.

The first major required offset project in Oregon involved tree-planting funded as part of the construction of a power plant in Klamath Falls. About 530 acres have been enrolled in the program since 1999, but that's short of the original goals, said Jim Cathcart, manager of the Forest Resource Trust at the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Many landowners were deterred by the requirement that the state place a lien on their property to protect its interest in the trees. But the state is now revising that requirement to make the program more attractive.

That highlights another challenge of making offsets work: Buyers want to be sure the offsets remain in place. In this case, they don't want trees they paid to plant to be cut down.

Nancy Pelton, who lives west of Eugene, signed up to turn her 23 acres west of Eugene into forest on Sept. 11, 2001, when the nation's mind was focused far away. But it seemed like a good time to do something positive, she said, even though global warming wasn't the issue it is today.

Many of the trees today are 20 feet tall.

"You see the land changing, and with global warming, it really feels good," she said. "We're doing something."

Michael Milstein: 503-294-7689; [michaelmilstein@ news.oregonian.com](mailto:michaelmilstein@news.oregonian.com)

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