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Offsets not created equal

Local Climate Trust is leader in often-hazy industry

BY BARBARA MITCHELL

Pamplin Media Group, Sep 11, 2007

Kermit the Frog may have had a rough time being green, but these days it's pretty easy to feel like you're doing your part to help the environment and curb global warming.

The rise of carbon offsets – and the corresponding buzz term “carbon neutrality” – seems a simple solution for environmentally guilt-free living.

All you have to do is pay for projects that reduce carbon emissions to balance out those you create by driving, using electricity, or engaging in other activities that produce carbon dioxide.

But, as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences found out earlier this year, the retail carbon offset market can be trickier to navigate than Wall Street.

The academy proudly and very visibly proclaimed the Oscars to be carbon neutral, having purchased enough credits to offset the celebrity lifestyles of every performer and presenter for one year.

However, a subsequent report by BusinessWeek found that the majority



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The Climate Trust's Craig Diamond calls carbon offsets one tool people can use to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions. He also suggests curbing one's consumption in the first place.

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of the projects funded by TerraPass, the company the academy purchased its offsets from, were projects that would have occurred without the infusion of offset funding – rendering those offsets more neutral than imagined, and leaving a bunch of high-profile carbon footprints firmly in place.

Governments increasingly are cracking down on industry culprits, which are required to reduce or offset their carbon footprints by meeting strict criteria or working with approved carbon offset providers.

Businesses and individuals who voluntarily choose to buy carbon offsets are presented with a plethora of organizations promising to use their money for the greater good.

However, as the Academy Awards debacle illustrates, the voluntary market can be a virtual Wild West, with no official standards or regulations to prevent well-meaning contributions from being misdirected.

Salem action sparked group

“The voluntary market is still really young and by definition unregulated because it’s voluntary,” says Craig Diamond, director of strategy and operation for the Portland-based Climate Trust.

While there are dozens of organizations around the world that have sprung up to offer carbon offsets, the Climate Trust isn’t just local – it’s different.

Other offset organizations have sprung out of great intentions or a sense of opportunity. The Climate Trust was the result of a pioneering piece of Oregon legislation, passed in 1997, that required new power plants to offset carbon emissions.

The law gave the plants the option of reducing carbon dioxide emissions on their own or finding a qualified provider to do it for them.

The Climate Trust was chartered to become that qualified provider the same year.

The organization is an independent nonprofit – companies offering carbon offsets fall into both nonprofit and for-profit categories.

The local nonprofit is a venerable institution in such a new and unregulated market.

Because it has a certain amount of government oversight, it must adhere to a strict set of standards.

This has made the Climate Trust an expert in the offset field, and the organization is a sought-out participant in regional, local and national policy discussions.

Car pools, truckers benefit

With a start in mandated offsets, branching out to the less-regulated business and consumer markets was a logical extension for the Climate Trust.

“It’s very important to be involved in the voluntary market, and it’s totally consistent with our nonprofit mission to be educational and get high-quality offsets out there,” Diamond says. “We have a specialty and a knowledge there that other organizations don’t.”

The idea of carbon offsets can seem ethereal or esoteric, but the Climate Trust – which currently is funding 17 projects, ranging from converting boilers in Montana schools to burn woody biomass, to financing rural wind

development in Iowa, to reforesting an Ecuadorian rain forest – also has made a local and visible impact.

Carpoolmatchnw.org, a Web site that the Climate Trust helped fund, links potential Portland-area car-pool partners and is expected to save 70,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide over a decade.

In addition, commuters in Southeast Portland already benefit from recalibration of traffic signals, which cuts down on idling time, reduces carbon emissions, increases gas mileage and lowers commute times – a project that would have stalled due to lack of government funding.

Through a truck-stop electrification project, truckers up and down the Interstate 5 corridor in Oregon and Washington already reduce emissions by plugging their rigs into an electrified parking system rather than idling their vehicles during their rest periods.

Lifestyle changes help, too

Businesses and individuals can calculate their own carbon footprint and offset it at www.carboncounter.org, which was created by the Climate Trust and fellow Portland nonprofit Mercy Corps and was one of the first online carbon calculators.

The carbon calculator sets offset pricing at \$12 per ton, so if you took a round-trip flight from Portland to Los Angeles (roughly five hours in the air) you'd be responsible for 1.23 tons of CO₂, which would run \$14.76.

The Climate Trust stands out as an offset provider that you can actually trust.

The organization claims 93 percent of funding is directed toward offset programs, and it receives high marks in a report comparing offset organizations by Clean Air-Cool Planet, a nonprofit based in the Northeast that is dedicated to working on solutions to global warming.

Diamond urges consumers to go beyond assuaging their conscience by purchasing offsets and to make a bigger difference by changing the way they live.

“You really do have to look at your whole lifestyle and what you're doing and what you're consuming and then address all those things,” he concludes. “Then offsets can be another tool in the tool chest, but it's certainly not the only tool.”

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Find out more

- Climate Trust, 503-238-1915, www.climatetrust.org
- To calculate your carbon footprint and pay for offsets go to www.carboncounter.org.

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