

SUSTAINABILITY

understanding CARBON OFFSETS

Heat-trapping greenhouse gases are now at record-high levels

Submitted by Catherine Ohl

As we experience the start of what looks to be another crazy winter, we are hearing more about carbon neutrality, carbon offsets, carbon footprint, green standards, greenwashing and more.

Carbon neutrality begins with reduction. It takes a concentrated effort to produce less waste and use more renewable energy. After reduction has reached its limit, or its comfortable threshold, carbon offsets can make up for the rest.

So what exactly is a **carbon offset**? When you buy an offset, you fund projects that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The projects might restore forests, update power plants and factories, build solar or wind plants or increase the energy efficiency of buildings and transportation.

GHG emissions mix quickly with the air and, unlike other pollutants, spread around the entire planet. Because of this, it doesn't really matter where GHG reductions take place just as long as fewer emissions enter the atmosphere.

GHG emissions are a global problem. Yet it's much cheaper to reduce or absorb

emissions in developing regions of the world. Offsets are often less expensive than retrofitting a building, converting to renewable energy or eliminating auto emissions in developed nations. Carbon offsets let you pay to reduce the global GHG total instead of making radical or impossible reductions of your own.

Businesses and individuals often buy carbon offsets to reduce their **carbon footprint** or to build up their "green image." Voluntary offsets should not be used as an excuse to overindulge in the production of GHG and not feel guilty about it. Before buying offsets, people should first reduce their own emissions— limit travel, get a hybrid vehicle, choose energy-efficient appliances or convert to renewable energy.

The concept of buying carbon offsets gets confusing because you are actually paying for non-emissions—something that doesn't even exist. Since this offsetting is new territory, authenticity is being bought about with new **green standards**— Voluntary Carbon Standard (VCS), the Gold Standard and the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standard. While these standards focus on different types of offsets, all of the



photo courtesy of Catherine Ohl

Wind farm outside Palm Springs, CA.

standards share the goal of bringing order to the booming carbon-offset business to prevent **greenwashing**.

Carbon offsets should encourage individuals and businesses to take responsibility for their part in global climate change. Offsets don't excuse excess, but should be viewed as an aid for people and the environment throughout the world. ■

Driving, flying, electricity and natural gas emit CO₂ contributing to climate change.



Reduce

- Practice Conservation
- Reduce Use
- Reuse
- Recycle



Neutralize

- Invest in projects that reduce or avoid carbon emissions



Offset

- Support
 - wind farms
 - solar power
 - geothermal
 - reforestation



Balance

- Decrease
- Reduce CO₂

Balance promotes a healthy environment & brighter future.