



5 Bright Ideas to Get On a Low-Carbon Diet

by Lydia Dishman
photos by Ashley Fulmer

Kirbie Crowe, Membership and Special Events director of Upstate Forever, doesn't consider herself an environmentalist. "Environmentally-conscious," she clarifies, "I do recycle." Yet she recently paid a nominal extra fee to American Airlines when purchasing a plane ticket to offset the carbon emissions for a flight to Chicago. "When I bought the ticket there was an option to offset the entire round-trip flight for an additional \$5 or \$6. They made it very easy to add on."

She's not alone. With the record-breaking temperatures and drought conditions of this past scorcher of a summer still in our collective memory, climate change (love recent Nobel winner Al Gore or hate him) is not only hard to ignore, it has become a business.

According to Cool Air-Clean Planet, a non-profit group that researches ways to fight global warming, the average U.S. citizen emits 21 tons of carbon dioxide annually, which is much higher than the 4.5 ton average rate of the global citizen. For those who still want and need to travel, or are not willing to give up their SUV, organizations have cropped up across the country to allow companies and individuals to neutralize their carbon footprint. Simply put, with a few clicks of a mouse and a cost between \$5 and \$50, they can purchase "carbon credits" to offset the amount of energy they use.

Upstate Forever as an organization has done just that. Executive Director Brad Wyche, says they have purchased carbon offset credits from the for-profit company, TerraPass to neutralize the output from both their main office in Greenville and their office in Spartanburg for an entire year.

TerraPasses can be purchased online at www.terrapass.com in different denominations. The site offers several different calculators that can figure out emissions rates for cars, flights, homes and businesses. There is even a calculator for dorms. TerraPass states they have already reduced over 500 million pounds of CO2 pollution by funding clean energy projects such as wind and biodiesel; biomass using dairy farm methane; and industrial efficiency that turns waste from landfills into electricity.

Here in Greenville, Virginia Simpson, chairwoman of Simpson and Partners says their program A.C.E.S. (Applied Credits for Environmental Sustainability) was initiated to ensure they'd be on the leading edge of consumer thinking. "Environmental stewardship is one of our areas of expertise. We use the program primarily for market research on how to utilize emission credits for our consulting clients." She believes virtually every business can benefit by wise use of environmental resources and says, "Being a good steward good for the bottom line."

A.C.E.S. sells carbon credits at different membership levels based on the size of the vehicle you drive from motorcycle to light truck, and bases the emissions rate at averages usually five to ten times the weight of the vehicle. Bought online at www.acesprogram.net, the carbon credits, purchased through the Chicago Climate Exchange, are used to invest in environmentally friendly projects such as reforestation, renewable energy sources, alternative fuels and new methods of carbon sequestration through eco-friendly waste management or waste-into-energy.

Simpson also points out that not all carbon emissions are created equal. "A carbon emission credit is an umbrella term that equals one metric ton of CO2 not released," she explains. But there are different kinds of greenhouse gases. Methane which occurs naturally when plants or other organic compounds, such as manure, decompose is actually 20x more than a ton of CO2 when calculated for carbon equivalents. She says, "We think it makes sense to start by cleaning all that waste." Projects on the horizon for her

company include capping the lagoon at Clemson's dairy farm to turn that methane into energy.

For each of these businesses, there are plenty of skeptics who say that climate change is not a reality and doubt whether the offset programs are really making a difference. Some believe they are just a way to assuage the guilt of maintaining a consumer lifestyle. Simpson disagrees, "We've created a new financial instrument. Carbon credits form the incentive and financing mechanism to clean up. It is an expensive deal for a farmer to clean up methane. Through organizations like ours, money is aggregated. Then a group like Environmental Credit Corporation will pay the farmer to cap his lagoon in return for carbon credits.

They will hold credits for future sale, much like commodities trading." She explains that the regulation comes from the verification that greenhouse gases have been removed by a waste management firm.

Anyone thinking about purchasing offsets should research the organization's policies and projects before turning over any money. Reputable companies list all the pertinent information about their operations as well as ways to track the verifications. David Andersen, LEED AP, Designer and Sustainability Consultant with the Johnston Design Group says, "I hate to think that participation in a carbon offset program is displacing money that would be better spent to expand sustainable options in our region. I would rather donate to a local land conservancy agency or power company to expand their renewable energy program

than to participate in a carbon

offset program that expands a wind farm in Oregon. If I decide to participate in a carbon offset program rather than put money in a savings account toward a photovoltaic array for my house, then I would be sure the program has a positive impact on my community before subscribing."

Anderssen also believes that carbon offsets are not a substitution for reasonable lifestyle changes that reduce your carbon footprint. So, in addition to the neutralizing power of a click, there are other, simple things you can do to get both you and your business on a low-carbon diet.

