



Energy Co2 : Emission Trading

How to Pick a Carbon Offset Provider

Anja Kollmuss, author of a 2007 Tufts University survey of carbon offset companies, explains what consumers should look for if they want to reduce their carbon footprint through offsets



"It's difficult to know which projects are good projects."

Anja Kollmuss, associate scientist for Stockholm Environment Institute and co-author of a 2007 Tufts Climate Initiative survey of 13 companies providing carbon offsets for air travel.

Would you recommend purchasing carbon offsets or is it not worth the money?

If I had to give people advice about carbon offsets, I guess I would come down somewhere in the middle. There are certainly many good projects that people can support, but it's difficult for people to know which projects are good projects. I think it will become easier when third-party standards become more established, the same way you can now by fair trade products - that will give the consumer more certainty about the quality of the offset they are buying.

What should consumers look for in a carbon offset provider?

There are a couple things that are very important. One is called additionality. That basically means you want to buy offsets that come from projects that would not have happened anyway. Even if it is a good project, like a wind farm, if it was built for other reasons - it would have been built whether you would buy offsets from it or not - you cannot really claim that you can neutralize your emissions that way. So you really need to buy offsets from projects that were made feasible because they were offset projects.

It's actually hard to test. There's no perfect way to do that. It's nevertheless important to ask the offset providers how they deal with additionality - what kind of tests they do to make sure that the offsets are additional. For example, a project cannot be a required by law. Obviously, if it's required by law, it would have happened anyway.



Picture Gallery (click on the image to start)

Carbon offsetting companies promise to neutralize greenhouse gas emissions. Does it work? (Photo: Reuters)

What else should buyers watch out for?

Aside from additionality, there's the issue of other environmental and social benefits. Carbon offsets were initially approved by the Kyoto Protocol under the Clean Development Mechanism because developing countries saw it as a possibility to get development benefits, like technology transfer, and additional environmental and social benefits. Originally, offsets were conceived as having dual benefits - not just helping reduce emissions, but also delivering development benefits.

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The majority of the offsets on the market do not deliver these additional benefits. They reduce emissions, but they don't create significant employment, reduce local air pollution, or protect biodiversity. If people are interested in purchasing offsets that do both of these things, it's safer if they support projects that are very explicit about these benefits. For example, projects that are certified under the Gold Standard or the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance (CCBA) standards.

Sounds like a lot to think about.

I have to say that right now, it's really difficult for consumers. One of the things I always tell people is that offsets should be the third thing on the list of their climate protection priorities. You really want to reduce your own emissions first - lower your consumption patterns, buy renewable energy, and switch from oil to natural gas. Secondly, you need to be politically active: only if we elect officials who are willing to enact stringent and far-reaching climate policies will we be able to address climate change. Lastly, for the emissions you cannot reduce, you can buy offsets.

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