Faith-based Climate Action: Towards Net Zero

Taking Responsibility for Residual Emissions

In working towards net zero, reducing carbon emissions is the first priority. However, most of us will continue to produce emissions even after we've taken all feasible steps to reduce them. After reduction, the next step is to take responsibility for our residual emissions.

Once we've estimated and assigned a cost to our carbon emissions, there are many ways to take responsibility for our residual emissions. These include:

1. Donation to organizations working to end the use of fossil fuels and secure justice for frontline communities most impacted by, but least responsible for, climate-change.
2. Purchase of carbon offsets
3. Purchase of renewable energy certificates (RECs).

Donation

There are many local and national organizations that work to bring about a just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Locally, these include our own UUFC Carbon Reduction and Responsibility Fund, the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition, Seeds for the Sol, the Oregon Clean Power Cooperative, the Greenbelt Land Trust, and many others.

Nationally, such organizations include, but are by no means limited to UU Ministry for Earth, the Climate Justice Alliance (Our Power Campaign, Reinvest in Our Power), the Indigenous Climate Network, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program, and Citizens Climate Lobby.

Also, no climate action is more important than financially contributing to the work to elect politicians who will support climate and climate-justice action at the local, state, and national levels.

Carbon Offsets

Carbon offsets are investments in projects that reduce carbon emissions, increase carbon storage, or remove carbon from the atmosphere. Many environmentalists question the validity and effectiveness of carbon offsets because of the difficulty in judging the quality of offset providers and projects. There are, however, standards to address those validity concerns, and those standards include the American Carbon Registry, Climate Action Reserve, Climate, Community & Biodiversity Alliance, Gold Standard, and Verified Carbon Standards.

Carbon emissions are a global problem, and carbon offsets are based on the idea that emission-reductions anywhere are equally valuable in reducing global emissions. Many carbon offsets sold in the US are generated by projects in the US. However, it can be much cheaper to reduce emissions in developing countries compared to developed countries or regions because, for example, currencies may be weaker, supplies and labor less expensive, and it may be easier to make changes where there is less developed infrastructure. As a result, the cost of carbon offsets can vary widely and will often be significantly less than the $50/ton minimum suggested in the discussion of the Social Cost of Carbon and Net-Zero Pricing <link>.

Locally, offsets can be purchased through the Corvallis Carbon Offset Fund and Seeds for the Sol. Offsets can also be purchased through the websites of the standards-issuing organizations above, and Green-e provides links to certified offsets.

Renewable Energy Certificates

Renewable energy certificates (RECs) are a tradable, market-based instrument that represents the legal property rights to the environmental attributes of electricity generated from renewable sources. One REC is created for every megawatt hour (MWh) of electricity generated and delivered to the grid from a renewable energy resource. The owner of a REC has exclusive rights to characterize the 1MWh of electricity associated with that REC as zero-emissions electricity.

RECs are often compared to carbon offsets, thought of as a type of offset, or described as offsetting emissions. Offsets and RECs, however, are fundamentally different instruments, with a key difference

being that RECs, unlike offsets, need **not** be additional. That is, RECs do **not** necessarily imply new capacity for electricity sourced from renewables.

Purchasing RECs supports the renewable-energy market by providing a demand signal to the market, which in turns encourages more supply of renewable energy, and the buyer of a REC can claim to use 1 MWh of renewable electricity from a low- or zero-emissions resource. However, REC buyers should avoid statements such as the purchase "offsets" emissions. Therefore, purchase of RECs *may* not be an appropriate way for a household to take responsibility for its emissions. The Center for Resource Solutions verifies and certifies green power programs and RECs. Pacific Power offers RECs through its Blue Sky program.

Purchasing RECs is often significantly less expensive than the $50/ton minimum suggested in the discussion of the Social Cost of Carbon and Net-Zero Pricing <link>.