

SPEAK UP & ACT NOW: SHORT GUIDES TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGEⁱ

CARBON OFFSETS

QUESTION: Do carbon offsets help mitigate climate change?

ANSWER: Not always. Carbon offsets are efforts by individuals or businesses to counterbalance their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (most often from burning fossil fuels for industrial manufacturing or transportation) by reducing or removing GHGs elsewhere. Types of carbon offsets are reforestation and [direct air capture and storage](#) of carbon dioxide. When done responsibly, carbon offsets may marginally help reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But they do not address the initial problem of carbon emissions. In a [Guardian interview](#), the director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research states, “offsetting can be valuable but only if companies are already cutting their carbon emissions by at least half each decade” (Harvey, 2023).

Here are some other problems:

- **Delayed impact.** [Planting trees](#) is one of the most popular types of carbon offsetting. However, trees take a long time to grow, and young trees don’t sequester that much carbon so these projects will only become viable carbon offsets around 2050, the [Paris Agreement](#) deadline for reaching net zero emissions.
- **Schemes don’t last.** Companies undergo leadership changes or encounter financial constraints that often jeopardize carbon offset projects.
- **Responsibility is shifted to low-emitting countries and groups.** For example, large-scale forest conservation initiatives often occur in areas where indigenous communities traditionally live. [Carbon Brief](#) found that indigenous peoples have been forcibly relocated because of carbon offsetting in the Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malaysia, and Indonesia as well as the Brazilian, Colombian and Peruvian Amazon.
- **“Greenwashing.”** Some companies use carbon offsetting programs to falsely portray themselves as environmentally friendly—as a marketing tactic. Claims that a product or company is “carbon neutral” just on the basis of carbon offsetting is often false considering the problems listed above.

ACTIONS – WHAT CAN WE DO?

- 1. SUPPORT COMPANIES THAT REDUCE THEIR OWN CARBON EMISSIONS AND FOCUS ON REDUCING YOUR PERSONAL CARBON FOOTPRINT.** Remember, carbon offsets **are not** the solution. Prioritize actions to reduce emissions first and foremost. See “Speak Up & Act Now: Short Guides to Address Climate Change” on home energy use, transportation, food production, consumption, and waste, plastic, renewable energy, government action, and fossil fuel and utility companies for actions you can take.
- 2. EVALUATE CARBON OFFSET PROJECTS.**
 - Use the [AVID+ framework](#) (Additional, Verifiable, Immediate, and Durable) to evaluate the quality of a company’s carbon offsetting efforts.
 - Look for projects that adhere to robust standards like the [Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Offsetting](#) (revised 2024) or the 10 core carbon principles of [The Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market](#).
- 3. CONTRIBUTE TO WORTHWHILE CARBON OFFSET PROGRAMS.** For example, [Terrapass](#) is considered a good program because it provides a variety of carbon offset options; uses third-party verification; and provides transparency about its carbon standards.
- 4. GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL CARBON OFFSET PROGRAMS.** Consider actions in your local area such as an urban afforestation program like [Southside ReLeaf](#) in Richmond, Virginia. Though programs like these don’t always quantify their carbon sequestration benefits, they may have other valuable community benefits such as reducing urban heat.

RESOURCES – WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

- [Mapped: The Impacts of Carbon-Offset Projects Around the World](#) by Daisy Dunne and Yanine Quiroz, Carbon Brief
- [How to Choose Carbon Offsets that Actually Cut Emissions](#) by Betsy Vereckey, MIT Sloan

ⁱ Prepared by members of the University of Richmond Osher Special Interest Group on addressing climate change (2024-25)