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Cost of Saving the Climate Meets Real-World Hurdles

By [David A. Fahrenthold](#) and [Steven Mufson](#)
Washington Post Staff Writers
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On the Internet, erasing your role in climate change seems as easy as ordering a DVD -- and cheaper than a cup of coffee a day.

With a click, a credit card and \$99, visitors can pay a [Silver Spring](#) nonprofit group, Carbonfund.org, to "offset" a year's worth of greenhouse-gas emissions. Whatever the customer put into the atmosphere -- by flying, driving, using electricity -- the site promises to cancel out, by funding projects that reduce pollutants.

Sites such as this one, offering absolution from the modern nag of climate guilt, have created a \$55 million industry that once would have been beyond the greenest of imaginations. The market for "voluntary carbon offsets" now encompasses dozens of sellers and thousands of buyers, including individuals and corporations.

But in some cases, these customers may be buying good feelings and little else.

A closer look reveals an unregulated market in which some improvements bought by customers are only estimated, extrapolated, hoped-for or nil. Some offsets support projects that would have gone forward anyway. Others deliver results difficult to measure.

Carbonfund.org, for example, has advertised offsets that finance wind farms and tree-planting projects. But some wind farms said the donations haven't led to anything new. And the benefits from some tree projects were unclear enough that Carbonfund.org no longer uses them to back offsets.

"People can feel very comfortable that they're reducing their carbon footprint" by buying Carbonfund.org offsets, Executive Director Eric Carlson said.

Many offset sellers do seem to deliver measurable cuts to pollution. One [Vermont](#) company, for instance, has been praised for offering customers a chance to support projects in development, effectively guaranteeing positive future impact.

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The business of selling carbon "offsets" to individuals who want to minimize their footprint on the environment didn't exist 20 years ago. Organizations that sell offsets promise to balance out household and business contributions to climate change. However, the market is chaotic and unregulated, and some researchers say offsets don't always deliver what they promise.

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Critics say that offset sellers usually have good motives. But the market is confusing enough that, this month, the [Federal Trade Commission](#) said it would look into whether consumers are being adequately protected.

"It's just like the Wild West," said Frank O'Donnell of the group Clean Air Watch. "There are no controls, no standards."

The offset is among the most unusual of commodities. Its substance is intangible, the absence of something. Some pollution would have existed, somewhere, sometime, the seller says, but now it won't.

But the market for the product grew by 80 percent in 2006 alone, according to a report last month from the market analysts New Carbon Finance and Ecosystem Marketplace. That was apart from the [Chicago](#) Climate Exchange, where companies can trade credits for greenhouse-gas reductions among themselves. That exchange has made efforts to verify that carbon offsets sold represent real pollution reductions.

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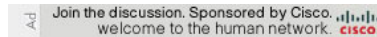
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