

Reduce your Carbon Footprint in Ten Steps

Earth First

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One of the most controversial environmental issues of the moment is how our Federal Government is planning to manage carbon emissions as a way of tackling climate change. However, whether you are an individual, an organization, a business or a government, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your carbon emissions, the total of which is described as your carbon footprint. You may think you don't know where to begin, but by reading this, you have already begun.

1. Make a commitment

Reducing your carbon footprint is no different from any other task. Telling people you will reduce carbon emissions may seem simplistic, but even simple actions like announcing your commitment to going carbon neutral can be effective.

2. Assess where you stand

Knowing where and how you generate greenhouse gases is the first step to reducing them. For individuals and small businesses, online calculators and internal assessments can help start the process. Have an energy audit done on your home or business.

3. Decide and plan where you want to go

Develop a strategy and action plan. Most homes or businesses can reduce energy use by 10 per cent—which almost always results in a 10 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. A plan to reduce carbon emissions will first focus on the type of energy and the way it is used; eg. electricity for buildings and fuel for transport. Reducing this energy can create instant savings.

4. De-carbon your life

There is a broader way to think about carbon and climate. Everything we do or use, embodies some form of carbon, either in products themselves or in the energy and materials it takes to make them.

If consumers, manufacturers and lawmakers all think 'low carbon' and 'climate friendly', savings in carbon emissions will multiply.

Reduction in packaging alone can result in huge savings in resources and transportation costs. Using recycled paper can save 1.4 tonnes of CO₂ for every tonne of paper and cardboard.

Other ways of reducing your carbon footprint include wasting less time and energy on travel. Cities and towns can build cycleways, and improve public transport options. Companies can purchase hybrid fleet vehicles, and individuals can car pool or use public transport. Secure bicycle storage and changing and shower facilities, are often inexpensive compared to other parking structures but create a strong incentive to commute by bicycle

5. Become energy efficient

Improving the efficiency of buildings, computers, cars and products is the fastest and most lucrative way to save money, energy and carbon emissions.

Very simple measures can lead to immediate savings. Just turning off unused lights, motors, computers and heating, or converting to compact fluorescent lights(CFLs) or solar heating can substantially reduce energy

6. Switch to low carbon energy

If possible, switch to energy sources that emit less carbon and can reduce costs. Generally, coal produces twice the emissions of gas, six times the amount of solar, 40 times the amount of wind and 200 times the amount from hydro. Choose to have a percentage of your electricity supplied from a renewable energy source, such as a wind farm.

Rooftop solar electric panels can provide energy over time, reduce electricity costs and provide a buffer against price fluctuations.

The transport sector is responsible for 25 per cent of total energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, mainly from burning petrol and diesel. Hybrid vehicles that combine electricity and conventional petrol or diesel engines, offer substantial fuel savings while reducing emissions.

7. Invest in offsets and cleaner alternatives

There is a limit to how much efficiency you can squeeze from your lifestyle or your organisation's operations, or how much renewable energy you can employ. The choice for those who wish to compensate for their remaining emissions is to fund an activity by another party that reduces emissions. This is commonly called a 'carbon offset' or 'carbon credit'. To purchase offsets, individuals or businesses pay an offset company to implement and manage projects that avoid, reduce or absorb greenhouse gases.

8. Become resource use efficient

Looking at your life or business through a carbon neutral lens can help you in other ways by increasing the efficiency of resource use, avoiding and reducing waste and ultimately improving your overall performance and reputation. Carbon is generally the waste product of producing energy, and reducing waste and becoming more efficient is always a good idea. Integrate the 3R approach—reduce, reuse and recycle—into your thinking.

9. Offer—or buy—low carbon products and services

The market for climate friendly products and services is growing rapidly. To offer such products, however, it's important to begin at the design stage. Ecodesign considers environmental aspects at all stages of development to create products with the lowest environmental impact throughout the product life cycle

10. Buy green, sell green

The market for green products and services is growing rapidly. Consumer surveys report that growing numbers of consumers are willing to buy green products if given the choice. Purchasing locally grown fresh produce is a very simple way of going green!

This article has been adapted from the UNEP Sustainable Development International publication 'Climate Action' (www.climateactionprogramme.org)

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