

## Offsetting is off-putting

In our efforts to deal with climate change, carbon offsetting is not the panacea that some people imagine.

The Environmental Audit Committee has missed a good opportunity to fully reappraise the practice of offsetting - its drawbacks as well as its benefits. While the airlines' efforts are criticised in its latest report and the practice of offsetting is widely encouraged, the flaws that undermine its value as a method of combating climate change are skipped over.

I am concerned by the comment from Tim Yeo, the committee's chairman, that "the UK's financial and carbon markets have much to gain from a rapid growth in this field". This, coupled the fact that many of the external contributors to the committee have a vested interest in offsetting, give the impression that the UK's financial interests have been given priority over the need for effective emission reductions for all of us on the planet.

Here at CarbonSense, we've been advising business and industry on climate change strategy for the past five years, and, while we have backed offsetting in the past we now view it as an inadequate strategy. The fact that it has become so fashionable also means it is diverting attention from more effective strategies.

For the consequences of climate change to be reduced, business, industry and utilities must rapidly move to revise practices on a global scale. Any business's primary focus when drawing up a climate change strategy should be to seek ways to reduce its own carbon emissions, and we must not encourage businesses, individuals or governments to effectively buy themselves a licence to continue damaging the atmosphere.

Few seem to understand that any carbon emitted into the atmosphere persists, and will cause global warming for years and decades to come, and these emissions will not be adequately compensated for, or negated, by giving money to an offsetting project.

There has been much debate recently as to whether offsetting works, and the report provides a valuable review of some of the key questions. But some fundamental issues have been downplayed or ignored.

One big problem is the 'time' factor. For instance, you cannot offset the emissions of a few hours' flying by installing low-energy lightbulbs in a developing country when the calculations are based on a carbon benefit being achieved over one full year, or possibly the entire lifetime of the bulbs. Global warming is not a future possibility; it is happening, and needs to be acted on immediately. To call such an inadequate fix "carbon neutral" is disingenuous.

It's also very difficult to calculate the size of an amount of carbon, and the "counting" methods used at the moment are unsatisfactory. So how can you genuinely assess either the amount that you are releasing into the atmosphere, or that which your offsetting project claims it will reduce?

The nature of carbon changes as time goes by, so effectively, there are various different types of carbon - or "carbon cycles" - and yet, in the offsetting world, they are often presented as the same. From a scientific point of view it is misleading to claim that you can effectively "counter out" a fossil fuel emission released by a plane (termed as "geological" carbon), by supporting a project that focuses on reduction by using the "biological" cycle (i.e. by planting trees).

Climate change is happening now - and fine adjustments to the deckchair of offsetting are wholly insufficient to deal with the impending challenge. For all our sakes, I hope that government will now draw on the latest science and conduct a more fundamental reappraisal of the part that offsetting should, or should not play, in its climate change strategy.

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