

Carbon trading is 'false solution' to global warming

by Cassandra Profita / The Daily Astorian
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Critics speak out on international climate change policy in Astoria

If you thought buying a carbon offset to mitigate your fossil fuel emissions would make the world a better place, think again.

According to Kevin Smith and Tamra Gilbertson, critics of international climate change policy who spoke in Astoria Friday, carbon trading is a false solution to global climate change that actually prolongs the world's dependence on fossil fuels.

Not only is it bad practice for consumers, they told a group of about 30 people at the Cannery Pier Hotel, it's the wrong way to get polluters to cut emissions worldwide.

Carbon trading is an alternative to a carbon tax that provides economic incentives for reducing emissions. The program assigns permits to existing polluters and caps the total amount of allowed emissions. Over time, the cap is lowered to force overall emissions reductions. Polluters that don't lower their emissions can buy carbon credits from those who have extra or generate carbon credits through environmental projects. In theory, the policy should benefit those who can reduce their emissions cost-effectively.

But, in practice, Smith and Gilbertson say the newly created carbon market is lining the pockets of the biggest polluters, and the companies selling carbon credits to consumers are middlemen who profit off carbon emissions. The projects developed to offset emissions and create carbon credits - such as tree plantations or technology upgrades - often hurt poor communities in the global south, they said.

Their solution is for people to invest their money in trustworthy local groups that improve the environment or work against fossil fuel development.

In Astoria, they said, fighting liquefied natural gas projects proposed for the Columbia River would be better than buying carbon credits from outside companies to offset emissions.

Brownsmead resident Cheryl Johnson drew a parallel between the mitigation LNG companies can do to correct for environmental damage to the Columbia River and the carbon offsets polluters can buy to make up for their emissions.

"You can do just about anything as long as on paper you can show it will be OK somewhere else," she said.

Astoria resident Tom Bender said he thinks carbon permits have created a fictitious commodity that can now be bought and sold.

"They're not real," he said. "They're like Ben Bernanke dollars."

He joked that he attended the talk because "I exhale carbon dioxide, and I'd like to be paid for it."

Astoria resident Robert Stang said he bought into the carbon trading system, but after hearing the talk he's not sure he should have.

"I've been buying carbon offsets because I travel and use gasoline, but it sounds like I've been pissing my money away," he said.

Christopher Paddon of Astoria called carbon trading "one of the greatest corporate greenwash scams."

He and Caren Black have put a lot of effort into reducing their ecological footprint through conservation, and they've added solar panels and a wind turbine to their home to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.

Buying a carbon offset is the easy way out, they said. The right answer is to change local behaviors and use local resources.

"How can we continue our way of life? We can't," said Black. "So let go."

Carbon trading is quickly becoming a popular response worldwide to the problem of climate change. But part of the reason it's become so popular is because it's benefiting large companies, said Smith.

"It's giving a lifeline to the most polluting industries and allowing them to continue with business as usual," he said.

The trading mechanism first gained credibility under a U.S. Clean Air Act program designed reduce sulfur emissions. It's been hailed as successful because more than 20 years it will have reduced sulfur emissions in the U.S. by 35 percent. However, under a different regulatory effort in Germany, sulfur emissions dropped 87 percent in 20 years without a trading mechanism.

"There's no real justification or track record of these things being successful in reducing emissions," said Smith, who said carbon trading could end up being more of an effort "to mask the fact that reductions might not be taking place."

The biggest firms have enough clout to turn a profit by manipulating the trading mechanism, he said, often lobbying for more pollution permits than they deserve. That way they can sell what they don't need.

"Not only are they not having to reduce emissions, they're making a lot of money," he said.

Some carbon offset projects have kicked people off their land, forced them to change their traditions and pushed "dinosaur technology" on poor communities who don't benefit from the projects at all.

Ultimately the real solution to climate change is removing subsidies to fossil fuel industries and transitioning to a "low-carbon way of life," said Gilbertson. "There are no political shortcuts to this."

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