

## green saver

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## A low-carb life

There's more than one way to offset your carbon emissions – and it's easy



**B**Y BURNING FOSSIL FUELS WE ARE releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, contributing to an enhanced greenhouse effect because the oceans and plants cannot absorb the carbon dioxide fast enough. With that in mind reducing our carbon footprint is vitally important. One way to do this is through carbon offset programs.

Basically, carbon offset programs allow you to compensate for the carbon dioxide your flights, cars and the household energy you use releases into the atmosphere. NSW's GGAS scheme, established in 2003, was one of the first carbon trading programs in the world, and has supported the growth of a bewildering array of carbon offset companies.

The most common programs cover tree planting, as trees soak up the carbon dioxide. Greenfleet is one such organisation. For \$40 Greenfleet will plant 17 native trees, which neutralises the emissions of the average car for one year (4.3 tonnes). It has planted more than 2 million native trees in Australia, with 800,000 more due to be planted this year.

## So how do you know if your money is going where it's supposed to?

There are some drawbacks to trees though. Trees take time to reach their full storage capacity, so the carbon you're offsetting today won't be captured by your trees for 30 years.

And when the tree dies and decomposes, a lot of the carbon it captured is released back into the atmosphere. Concerns have also been raised over what companies do if the trees die before full storage is achieved.

Renewable energy investment programs are an alternative to trees. These include solar and wind farms, geothermal, biomass and bio-fuel. Some energy providers provide carbon offset programs as part of your electricity bill. Origin Energy and Integral Energy, for example, provide



100% renewable energy to households. Energy Australia offers two renewable energy products: 100% green power at an extra \$100 a quarter, and 10% green power at \$12 a quarter.

Another approach is that adopted by Easy Being Green ([www.easybeinggreen.com.au](http://www.easybeinggreen.com.au)). Purchased credits support their community-based education and energy-efficiency programs. One project provides householders with free packs of six energy-saving light globes and a water-saving showerhead. They claim that this alone has reduced carbon dioxide pollution by 620,000 tonnes and saved 5.8 gigalitres of water since 2004.

The benefit of these programs is that the credit you buy works immediately to prevent carbon being released into the atmosphere. However, they don't do anything about reducing the existing carbon dioxide levels.

So how do you know if your money is going where it's supposed to? One way is to buy only from certified providers. If the carbon credits you purchase are situated in Australia, look for the Australian Greenhouse Office's Greenhouse Friendly Program accreditation or the GreenPower logo ([www.greenpower.gov.au](http://www.greenpower.gov.au)). For overseas programs, look for organisations that follow guidelines like the International Voluntary Carbon Standard.

Prices vary between the carbon offset providers. For example, the cost of offsetting one tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> gas is \$28 through Climate Positive, \$10 through Greenfleet, and \$20 through Easy Being Green. Just like any purchasing decision, consider the programs carefully before making your choice.

### Green tip

The best way to reduce your carbon emissions is to avoid them in the first place. There is lots you can do that will save you money and cut your emissions.

Leave the car at home for short trips or use public transport or a pushbike instead. Use energy-efficient light globes and turn off lights and electrical appliances in unused rooms. Electrical goods left on standby can account for up to 12% of your annual bill. Use thermal-lined curtains and block drafts, and rug up instead of switching on a heater. Wash your clothes in cold water and avoid using the dryer when you can.

If you want to do more, think about switching from electric to gas if possible. Natural gas (as well as LPG-powered cars) produces less greenhouse gas emissions and is 2.2 times cheaper than electricity for heating and cooking. Installing a solar water heater can also cut carbon emissions and your energy bill by 60%.