

Climate-friendly Purchasing

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Christopher M. Jones,
Berkeley Institute of the Environment
University of California, Berkeley

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It is difficult to overestimate the power of consumers to influence climate change. Virtually all of the 26 billion metric tons of CO₂ equivalent greenhouse gases released to the atmosphere each year globally can be traced to goods and services consumed by individuals and households. Due to the global economy's dependence on fossil fuels for energy, every dollar spent by consumers results in the release of climate warming gases. But which decisions result in the greatest impacts? Which ones can be avoided? Is reducing consumption the answer, or can we somehow buy our way out of the problem? The answer depends on values and lifestyle choices of each individual, but action itself is an unavoidable personal daily choice.

The first step towards climate-friendly purchasing is to understand the relative contribution of consumer decisions to your total climate footprint. A good start is to fill out the carbonneutral.org calculator. You can estimate annual household emissions from food, goods and services, in addition household energy and transportation. On average, every \$1,300 consumers spend on food releases about 1 ton of CO₂ into the atmosphere, and every \$2,000 spent on goods (motor vehicles, clothes, appliances, household supplies, toys, furniture, etc.), also results in about 1 ton of CO₂. So, living with less stuff means fewer emissions...but of course, it also means living with less stuff!

Fortunately, there are many ways for individuals to reduce their climate footprint without giving up quality of life. Most people would agree that driving less increases quality of life. Eliminating beef, dairy and heavily processed foods could save your household several tons of CO₂ each year. For example, our research shows that eliminating meat would save households 1.6 tons of CO₂ per year (equivalent to 145 gallons of gasoline), and substituting the same number of pounds of beef for chicken would save the average U.S. household almost half a ton of CO₂ per year. Buying second-hand goods (particularly clothes) and repairing or maintaining existing goods can also make a huge difference. Perhaps most importantly, if instead of buying *stuff*, people spent more money on services and information (essentially paying for people's creativity) individuals could lead more meaningful lives, while helping the economy transition into a clean energy future.

It is also important to keep in mind the scale of the challenge climate change presents. In order to live at the global average, Americans would need to reduce their emissions by

80%. But global emissions also need to be reduced by 80% to stabilize the climate. From a perspective of equity, this means U.S. emissions need to be reduced to almost zero, and maybe beyond that if we consider our historic climate debt (CO₂ still in the atmosphere from past consumption). That is the scale of the problem.

So how can individuals do their share? Carbon neutrality may be the only answer, and that is why carbon offsets are so important. Carbon offsets, allow consumers to donate money to projects that promise to reduce net greenhouse gases through renewable energy, energy efficiency, or afforestation projects in an equal amount to the value of the credit. There are many providers of carbon offsets, which sell between \$5 and \$25 per ton of CO₂, but quality does vary widely. Do your homework and purchase quality offsets (for example credits certified by the Gold Standard). Offsets are not perfect, but they will improve with time, and they are urgently needed on a massive scale if individuals are to take responsibility for their climate debt and help confront the climate crisis.

