

# The Register-Guard

## Opinion

## **Arresting climate change requires reducing consumption-based emissions**

---

**By Bob Doppelt**

Posted May 30, 2018 at 11:01 PM

In addition to cutting emissions generated within the city for heating, cooling and transportation, Eugene's Climate Recovery Ordinance seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions produced outside of town to make and deliver goods and services to Eugene. These "consumption-based" emissions must be greatly slashed to meet the goals of the CRO — and do our part to prevent civilization-altering climate disruption.

The average Eugene resident's consumption-based emissions are now estimated to be over two times larger than those generated within the city. Residents have a responsibility to reduce their consumption-based emissions. One way is to shift spending to less emission-intensive goods and services.

Food and beverages are a place to start. The energy involved in raising crops and in processing, distributing, preparing and disposing of food — along with the methane generated by livestock production — makes emissions from this sector among the highest of any products on the planet. They are the largest source of Eugene's consumption-based emissions — generating 547,984 million metric tons, according to a 2015 report.

These emissions can be sliced by purchasing locally grown organic and sustainable foods with minimal or no packaging. They generate far fewer emissions than heavily processed food that is shipped long distances.

Shifting from meat to plant-based foods by just 20 percent will noticeably cut emissions. Eliminating food waste is imperative — 25 to 40 percent of all food produced in or imported to the U.S. is never eaten, resulting in needless emissions.

Plastic bottles should be avoided when possible, because making one pound of PET — polyethylene terephthalate — plastic can generate up to three pounds of carbon dioxide.

With research and persistence, people can shift from high- to lower-emission goods and services in many of the other major sources of consumption-based emissions identified in the 2015 Eugene report: health care, construction materials, freight and transportation services, vehicles and parts, appliances, furnishings, electronics, lighting and fixtures, and clothing.

Governments can make it easier to purchase lower-emission goods by requiring all products to display their carbon footprint on their labels.

Manufacturers have a responsibility to shrink emissions throughout their supply chains, but lack incentives to do so. The Eugene City Council could change this by enacting what are called “extended producer responsibility” policies for all goods sold locally. EPR policies make producers responsible for collecting their products at the end of their useful life, rather than allowing manufacturers to pass these costs to the government — meaning the public.

Last year John Coyne of Unilever Canada described EPR to the U.S. Product Stewardship Forum.

“EPR is not simply about shifting responsibility for funding the collection of waste from local governments to businesses,” he said. “EPR is not a tax, nor should it ever be ... EPR is also not waste management... . Instead, EPR is focused on establishing effective programs to collect valuable materials so that they can be reused, and reused profitably.”

More than 60 EPR laws and programs exist nationwide. The requirement should become universal with the goal of establishing a circular economy. Such an economy would reduce materials extraction, water and energy use, waste and emissions — and also resolve local recycling problems.

Shifting the purpose of spending from surplus wants to real needs — including the need for meaning in life so many people lack today — is also crucial for psychological wellness, ecological resilience and other factors that influence local quality of life could be assessed.

Atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions just topped 410 parts per million, something not seen in millions of years. Bold thinking is needed to prevent catastrophe. An all-out effort to eliminate consumption-based emissions will spur many exciting local innovations while helping to minimize the dire consequences of climate disruption.

*Bob Doppelt of Eugene is executive director of the Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change and sustainability-related issues.*