

Halting climate change starts at home

By Bob Doppelt

For The Register-Guard

Published: July 21, 2008 12:00AM

Who would have thought that purchasing local cherries rather than Morellos grown in Germany could help solve the climate crisis? That's what Rhonda Smith found when she began to look to reduce her climate footprint.

Like Smith, you don't need to wait for government action to tackle the climate crisis. You can begin to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions today. Your efforts can create significant personal and social benefits.

Home is the best place to start reducing emissions because households are the ultimate end users of most of the energy consumed, and thus are directly or indirectly responsible for most of the emissions.

The Oregon Department of Energy calculates that transportation is Oregon's largest source of emissions (34 percent) and electrical consumption, which includes residential use, is second (32 percent).

A city of Eugene assessment found that transportation produces 51 percent of the community's greenhouse gas emissions and residential use accounts for 22 percent. Transportation accounts for 49 percent of Springfield's emissions and residential use constitutes 10 percent, according to a 2005 assessment by my University of Oregon program.

These figures do not include emissions from air travel, food consumption, maintaining lawns and gardens, products purchased for household use, or the decomposition of household waste in landfills. Even without these sources, it is clear that households are ultimately responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions.

That's good news, because households can quickly and easily begin to reduce their emissions through behavioral changes without waiting for new technologies or government policies.

Additionally, the more that individuals become aware of the causes and consequences of climate change and ways that emissions can be cut, the greater the

pressure will become for meaningful government action. Market demand also will grow for low-emission goods and services.

Last year, 50 community members received 30 hours of free training on how to reduce their household-related greenhouse gas emissions through the Climate Master program organized by my program at the University of Oregon. The training focused on reducing emissions from home energy use, transportation, lawn and gardens, food purchases and waste.

An evaluation of the program found that participants increased their purchases of energy efficient products. They saved energy by doing such things as unplugging appliances when not in use to reduce “phantom” energy loads and lowering the temperatures of water heaters and furnaces.

They used more alternative transport and purchased more local foods. They also decreased their purchase of disposable goods and ate less meat.

Through these steps, participants reduced their greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 4,317 pounds each, or more than two tons per person. This constitutes a 23 percent reduction from the Eugene per capita emission rate of 8.6 tons.

In addition, participants said many of these steps saved money. Many said they felt an increased sense of well-being, empowerment and health.

A few even said that education about reducing their climate footprint changed their lives.

Rhonda Smith told me she participated in the Climate Master program because “I wanted to learn more about climate change and ways I could reduce my carbon footprint. I was also intrigued by the ‘master’ model, as it encourages a people-to-people approach rather than an expert-to-novice approach.”

After her classes, Smith said, “I am more cognizant of the origin of foods I purchase. Although I have always been conscious of buying local products, I didn’t realize that my favorite Morello cherries at Trader Joe’s came from Germany until I started paying attention. Now I eat local cherries in season, but I haven’t given up organic chocolate from Madagascar!

“I consciously use trip-chaining and carpooling as a way to reduce car trips. Although I commute to work by bike or bus, I still own a car and I try to make the trips count.”

Perhaps the most significant change that occurs when you become aware of your personal climate footprint is the new thinking it spurs.

“I’m continually motivated to seek new ways to use less energy,” Smith said. “I

think about the energy costs associated with the transportation and distribution of food and try to make purchases to reduce those costs.”

New technologies and new policies, while vital, will not solve the climate crisis. Success requires thinking and acting in new ways.

You don't need to attend a Climate Master program to make changes. But you do need to realize that climate protection can begin at the household level, and that you can start today.

HHHH

Bob Doppelt (bob-cwch@att.net) is director of resource innovations at the University of Oregon; he also directs the UO's Climate Leadership Initiative. He is writing a series of columns on climate change for The Register-Guard.

[Copyright © 2008 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA](http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright)
<http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright>
