

Take a breather on carbon chatter

by *The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star*

What do the NFL, the band Coldplay and the humanities college at the University of Utah have in common? They've all pledged to become carbon "neutral," a blissful state of being in which the amount of greenhouse gases one emits is supposedly offset.

It's the environmental equivalent of Weight Watchers. People figure out their carbon "footprint" - how many emissions they release at home, at work and through travel - and try to atone for their global warming sins. The NFL is buying energy certificates to offset the electricity used at the Super Bowl. The University of Utah is donating to a charity that pays indigenous Costa Ricans to preserve their rain forest.

The trend has been around for a while, but it really took off since Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth." Now, eco-conscious brides are planning carbon neutral weddings. Even petroleum giant BP has gotten in on the act, offering a carbon calculator on its Web site.

It sounds brilliant on paper, but it's really a sad commentary on both our nation's lack of leadership in setting a sustainable energy policy and on our own flawed consumer mind-set. (Never mind the fact that, as mammals, people can never be truly carbon neutral, due to that pesky activity called breathing.) As federal environmental regulators drag their feet on measures that could dramatically reduce emissions - not just carbon, but sulfur dioxide and mercury, too - we're doing silly things, like planting 10,000 mango trees in India, as did Coldplay. There are much better ways to conserve closer to home. Swap out incandescent light bulbs for fluorescent ones. Drive less. Better yet, petition municipal governments to improve public transportation, and support the construction of renewable energy sources, like wind farms. Demand that Washington, D.C., raise automotive mileage standards, as Al "The Oracle" himself did before a congressional committee Wednesday.

Further, the United States, the world's most prolific polluter, should revisit its stance on the Kyoto Protocol, the global greenhouse gas pact that it walked out on in 2001. The U.S. doesn't have to join, but it needs to be back at the table in a leadership role.

Meantime, consumers need not buy dubious online credits to faraway charities to assuage their global-warming guilt, like the papal indulgences of yore. All this well-intentioned greenness is just so much buzz unless it translates into policy. Take Coldplay. As the band continues to tout its stewardship, most of those mango trees have reportedly died from neglect. Forget neutrality. How about getting active?

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