

Frequently Asked Questions about the Climate Action Plan

1. What is "Climate Neutrality?"

Climate neutrality refers to the balancing of the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels and other sources, with the funding of measures that prevent the release of greenhouse gases such as conservation, efficiency and renewable energy.

2. How close are we to reaching Climate Neutrality now?

In 2005, the students set out to offset the carbon emissions from our electrical energy consumption. In 2006, we began purchasing RECs and over the past four years, the quality of our RECs has improved dramatically. Each REC purchased now in 2009 offsets one and one-half the carbon that the 2006 RECs did. Because of this fact, our purchase of 40,000 RECs offsets more than 2/3 of the University's total carbon footprint.

3. What are RECs and how do they work?

Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), also known as **Green tags**, **Renewable Energy Credits**, or **Tradable Renewable Certificates (TRCs)**, are tradable environmental commodities in the United States that represent proof that 1 megawatt-hour (MWh) of [electricity](#) was generated from an eligible [renewable energy](#) resource. (*source: Wikipedia*
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RECS>)

These certificates can be sold and traded or bartered, and the owner of the REC can claim to have purchased renewable energy. While traditional carbon [emissions trading](#) programs promote low-carbon technologies by increasing the cost of emitting carbon, RECs can incentivize carbon-neutral renewable energy by providing a production subsidy to electricity generated from renewable sources. It is important to understand that the energy associated with a REC is sold separately and is used by another party. The consumer of a REC receives only a certificate.

In states that have a REC program, a green energy provider (such as a wind farm) is credited with one REC for every 1,000 kWh or 1 MWh (for definition of units, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MWh>) of electricity it produces (for reference, an average residential customer consumes about 800 kWh in a month). A certifying agency gives each REC a unique identification number to make sure it doesn't get double-counted. The green energy is then fed into the electrical grid (by mandate), and the accompanying REC can then be sold on the open market.

4. Will it only cost \$200,000 to reach Climate Neutrality? That seems really cheap.

Not only has the price per REC gone down as we began purchasing RECs through a competitive bid process (RFP-Request for Proposal); but also, the CO2 emissions offset per REC has gone up as we pick and choose the region from where the RECs come. Therefore, based upon current cost of RECs, with a high carbon offset value, WWU can reach technical climate neutrality for \$180k-\$210k.

5. Are REC prices going to go up over the years?

We can pretty much figure there will be an increasing demand for RECs which, through supply and demand models, could cause REC prices to increase. But on the other hand, as there is greater demand there will most likely be an increase in RECs produced to meet the demand, which may, in turn, help keep prices down. So yes, hard to predict the price – but WWU’s focus needs to not be on the purchase of RECs but on the decrease of our emissions (which will help to reduce the impact of any price increases.)

6. I thought RECs meant that we bought into the development of green power vs. buying the power itself.

Yes, that is true, we are paying to help offset the higher cost of producing electricity through the use of renewable resources – see explanation of RECs (number 3 above.)

7. Will there be some funding from our utility providers for making our campus buildings and infrastructure more efficient or will this cost come from the general budget?

Currently, our electrical energy provider, Puget Sound Energy (PSE), has a very aggressive campaign to reduce the infrastructure demand for electricity. They have funded through their grants the replacement of much of the campus lighting infrastructure with lower energy using fixtures. Because we buy our natural gas on the open market, we do not have such an arrangement with commodity providers. However, because we have realized savings by prudent buying on the open market, the University could choose to use those savings to fund the Climate Action Plan.

8. Why purchase RECs now? Why not put this money into infrastructure improvements like building efficiency and a biomass steam plant?

Purchasing RECs today is only a stop-gap measure while we work on infrastructure changes that will help to reduce our energy consumption. However, the RECs WWU purchases have a direct benefit to the environment today and the CAP proposal for climate neutrality likewise has an immediate positive impact. Behavioral and infrastructure changes take time and money to implement and the climate situation is urgent.

9. What about “embodied energy?” Is this included in our footprint analysis?

Embodied energy refers to the energy it takes to produce all the material items we create and use every day. This includes harvesting the natural resources used and the fuel to create the power for refining them to the energy to transport the item to its present location, and by some standards may also include what energy it would take to dispose of that item as garbage. This is not at present included in the standardized Clean Air Cool Planet online calculator and therefore is not included in our footprint analysis. According to some estimates, the embodied energy of

our structures and their contents may be as much as 65% of our carbon burden (*source: <http://norbeck.org/MCCF/?p=77> 10/09*).

10. Is paying for RECs going to “absolve” people of any responsibility to take responsibility for their own actions? If we offset 100% of our climate footprint, why does it matter that I conserve energy, take the bus and buy local foods?

The key to long-lasting climate neutrality is to use less energy, not pay for the privilege of using more. There is a valid concern that with starting off paying for RECs we might be sending a signal that it’s okay to use more energy (i.e., just buy more RECs) – however, that just means we must have a strong message about conservation being the long-term solution and diligently work to reduce our carbon footprint (which in turn will reduce the amount of money needed to be spent on offsets).

11. Q: Is this draft of the CAP a final draft? How can I make my perspectives known?

No. The document posted online is the latest in many versions, but this document is still in the review process and will most likely see more changes. You can make suggestions by writing to sustain@wwu.edu or by calling the CAP Coordinator, Irene Hinkle, at 360-650-3370.

12. Q: Will this plan change over time?

The CAP is a living document which means that it will evolve as our related knowledge and tools evolve and opportunities emerge in the future that don’t exist now. It is also a living document in that it is inclusive and able to change to reflect the voice of the people who give input to its creation. Already, public forum discussions have resulted in changes in the draft going before the Board of Trustees for a vote in December. We wrote the document to be firm in its stand for action on our collective climate impact since it is a Climate **ACTION** Plan. However, we also wrote it to identify uncertainties and embody resilience in our approach to reaching actual climate neutrality. We would love further input on all of these suggested approaches, so please access the complete and updated version of the CAP online at the Office of Sustainability website found at: <http://www.wwu.edu/sustain/climateneutralwestern/>