

Carbon offsetting and aviation

What is carbon offsetting?

Emissions of a trip or activity are calculated, then “carbon credits” are purchased to fund projects that prevent or remove the equivalent amount of greenhouse gases elsewhere. Many accredited carbon offsetting schemes involve planting trees to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Renewable energy projects also curb carbon emissions by replacing fossil fuels. The amount of investment from those hoping to compensate for their carbon footprints has climbed fourfold in recent years, finds the offsetting watchdog Gold Standard.

Which companies offset carbon?

EasyJet’s pledge to fly carbon neutral follows that from other airlines aiming to keep passengers despite their climate concerns. At least 10 other airlines, including Air New Zealand and Air Canada, offer carbon offsetting to their passengers. British Airways says it plans to start offsetting the carbon from all its domestic flights from

2020. For passengers flying further afield BA offers a carbon calculator and range of accredited offset schemes to invest in. The schemes include reforestation in the Amazon basin (pictured) and low-smoke stoves in Sudan. Royal Dutch Shell offers drivers who fill up at its petrol stations in the UK and Netherlands the chance to “drive carbon neutral” by using carbon credits linked to conservation projects in Peru, Indonesia, the US and Britain.

Why do airlines embrace offsetting?

The aviation industry is increasing its carbon footprint, continuing to add to numbers of flights each year. It plays a growing role in the climate crisis by releasing hundreds of millions of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere annually. Global carbon emissions from commercial flights are rising up to 70% faster than predicted, says the International

Council on Clean Transportation. The council says emissions rose by a third from 2013 to 2018, equating to building 50 coal-fired power plants; they could triple by 2050 if

left unchecked. Not all airlines have taken up carbon credits. American Airlines does not offer a scheme; it says it has taken “many meaningful steps to reduce fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions”, such as buying planes that are more fuel efficient.

Do campaigners back offsetting?

Green groups advocate fewer flights, to help cut aviation emissions. Many say carbon offsetting can do more harm than good by giving licence to airlines to keep polluting. There is also concern that the confusing state of carbon accounting can mean projects falling short of neutralising the damage caused by air travel. Greenpeace UK described easyJet’s

carbon offset scheme as “jumbo-size greenwash” and warned that expert analysis had cast serious doubts about whether offsetting schemes worked at all. It says policymakers should introduce “frequent flier” levies to curb people’s flights, taxing people more heavily the more they fly. Other groups urge passengers to view carbon offsets as a last resort; they help green projects but are not a solution to the climate crisis.

Which green projects get funding?

The early days of voluntary carbon offsetting were relatively unregulated and open to abuse. Now watchdogs help verify carbon offset schemes and carbon saving projects. These include the American Carbon Registry, Climate Action Reserve, Gold Standard, Plan Vivo, and Verra. Gold Standard offers carbon offsets that help install low-smoke stoves in Rwanda and build windpower projects in Rajasthan. C-Level offsets emissions by helping to restore grasslands in Mongolia and reduce deforestation in Tanzania.

Jillian Ambrose

