

How Big Is Your Footprint...in the Atmosphere?

When you're planning to green your home or business, one of the terms you'll hear often is "reducing your carbon footprint." I've been asked a number of times now – what does this mean, and why is it important?

Your carbon footprint is one way of measuring your impact on the earth. It represents the total amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that are generated as a result of your lifestyle, business operations, and daily activities. It can include direct factors such as:

- the kind of fuel you use to heat your home
- the efficiency of your HVAC system
- the kind of fuel your car uses, and its efficiency
- the kind of lawnmower, leaf-blower, tiller, etc. you use – gas, electric, or battery-powered?
- ...and so forth

But your carbon footprint isn't limited to the gases that are emitted by the machines and appliances you personally operate. Like karma, it also reflects your global impact through things you pay for, but do not do directly. Just to give four examples:

How Is Your Electricity Generated?

The vast majority —98% percent of energy companies use a mix of nonrenewable power sources: coal, natural gas, petroleum, and nuclear energy, and large hydropower. A few others, such as CleanCurrents (www.cleancurrents.com) provide energy generated through renewable sources.

How Much Energy Do You Consume by Turning On the Faucet?

Public water supply and treatment facilities use an average of 56 *billion* kilowatt hours of energy per year – enough to power 5 million homes for that same period. At that rate, running your faucet for just five minutes consumes enough energy to power a 60-watt light bulb for 14 hours – and that's not even including the energy it would take to heat that water!

What Happens to Your Trash after Pickup?

On the average, each American generates roughly 4.72 pounds of trash per day, of which only about 1.5% was recycled. If the rest is hauled to a landfill, it contributes to your carbon footprint by generating a volatile gas. It's a particularly toxic combination of greenhouse gases, about 40-60% methane, with the remainder being mostly carbon dioxide (CO₂), with varying amounts of nitrogen, oxygen, water vapor, sulfur and hundreds of other pollutants, as well as inorganic contaminants like mercury and occasionally even radioactive contaminants such as tritium (radioactive hydrogen).

How Far Has Your Food Traveled?

In most American supermarkets, we expect to see fresh produce throughout the year, regardless of the season where we live. In fact, seasonal produce at roadside stands and farmers' markets are a treat by comparison! But what's the cost of this year-round harvest? You guessed it – the emissions of countless ships, planes and trains as our fruits and veggies are transported to us from around the world. To give you an idea of the impact you can have: just by eating local food once a week, you'll be saving 2.5 tons of CO₂! And of course you won't just be fighting global warming...you'll be gaining the whole Farmer's Market or co-op experience, going to "market day" with your neighbors and local farmers every week!

These are just four examples of the many factors that combine to make up your carbon footprint. To discover your own environmental impact, check out the EPA's carbon calculator at http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind_calculator.html.

And to learn how you can reduce your carbon footprint through simple, money-saving actions, check out my web page at <http://www.freshgreenimage.com/green-irene>.