

Carbon Offset Kiosks Help Air Travelers Ditch Guilt

by RORI GALLAGHER



Enlarge

Courtesy of San Francisco International Airport

A Climate Passport kiosk in the San Francisco Airport. Customers can use the kiosk to pay a fee to offset the carbon dioxide emissions of their trip.

September 29, 2009

text size **A A A**

If you're an environmentally conscious traveler, you may be feeling a little bit guilty about flying these days.

Airplanes spew harmful greenhouse gases into the air. San Francisco International Airport is taking a step to help ease these concerns: It's the first airport to install self-serve kiosks where passengers can purchase carbon offsets for their flights.

The airport has partnered with a private company to provide the offsets. But carbon offsets for travel are unregulated, so will patrons get what they pay for?

Seeing The Intangible — In A Kiosk

Michael Wara, an environmental law professor at Stanford, says the idea is pretty abstract.

"I mean, what are you buying?" he says. "You are buying a piece of paper that represents the fact that an emission of an odorless, colorless gas did not occur somewhere else."

The airport is hoping to turn that abstract concept into reality. Kandace Bender, deputy airport director of communications and marketing says it cost \$190,000 to develop the "climate passport" kiosks from scratch.

"We felt it was a good public service for our passengers and for the environment," she says.

The kiosks look similar to self check-in machines or small ATMs. Travelers input the number of miles their trip will cover, how long it will take and the number of passengers they plan to buy offsets for.

For example, for a 6,000-mile-long, 12 hour flight, the carbon offset cost would be about \$34.34 for one traveler. The price varies from a few dollars for a short West Coast flight to as much as \$70 for an international trip.

You are buying a piece of paper that represents the fact that an emission of an odorless, colorless gas did not occur somewhere else.

- *Michael Wara*

Guinea Pig

Ari Peskoe was the first passenger to try the carbon offset system. He paid \$11 to offset his flight back home to Boston. Although Peskoe decided to swipe his credit card, he was unsure about what he actually paid for.

"That's a good question, right?" Peskoe says. He said he thought his money would help fund a carbon-offset project in the Garcia River Forest in Mendocino County, about 100 miles north of San Francisco. "I suppose that's what it goes to, but I'm not entirely sure."

Peskoe's money is indeed designated for the Garcia River forest, which spans 37 square miles and is mainly composed of carbon dioxide-trapping Redwood trees and Douglas Fir trees that have been logged several times.

The forest is now owned by the nonprofit Conservation Fund, which is allowing the trees to grow tall. The extra tons of carbon that get trapped from allowing the trees to grow tall are sold as offsets. Those offsets have the stamp of approval from the nonprofit Climate Action Reserve, which verifies that the offsets are legitimate.

'Better Than Nothing'

Wara says that the Climate Action Reserve's authorization is a step in the direction offsets need to go,

but not all the way there.

"That's better than nothing," he says. "But it's not the same as, for instance, having the California Air Resources Board certify that an offset is real, or having the Environmental Protection Agency certify that an offset is real. I think that's the future, and that's going to make offsets a little more expensive."

Wara says he thinks consumers would be willing to pay a higher price for more certainty. In the meantime, he says customers should try to be educated shoppers — which isn't always easy in airports.

"How can you be educated when you're on your way from security to the gate trying to catch your international flight?" he says.

Those hesitant to use a kiosk while rushing through the airport have several other options for purchasing carbon offsets, including the airport's webpage, some of the airlines and several for-profit and nonprofit companies. For its part, the airport hopes that whether or not travelers end up using the kiosks or not, they will raise awareness about the environmental impact of flying.

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Charles Phillips (shotgunner) wrote:

"Environmentalism isn't just for the left."

Chewbacca,

That's absolutely right, though I think that all this cap and trade nonsense is being bought only by the left. We need to take real, concrete steps to break our dependency on oil right now.

If anyone can't come to grips with the idea that we are screwing up the planet, then maybe they should think of it as a national security issue. No matter how much we "drill, baby drill" there simply isn't enough oil that can be brought into production before our oil-based economy collapses.

Think of it as security or think of it as environmentalism, either way, we've got to break our dependence on oil and switch to cleaner sources of energy.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 11:05:59 AM

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Chewbacca the Wookiee (Chewie) wrote:

The concept of offsets is solid. If there's something people really want to do (like fly on planes) and that thing unavoidably causes lots of pollution (which flying does), there's got to be a way to compensate for the pollution.

If you fly on a plane, what's wrong with paying somebody to build a solar panel (or something else) somewhere to offset your emissions? Nothing.

The only real issue is constructing a verification system that people trust. Once that's accomplished, offsets for flying should be mandatory, not voluntary. People need to be forced to take responsibility for their pollution. It's obvious they won't just do it out of the goodness of

their hearts.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:57:06 AM

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Rivkah Rubinstein (HappyHarpy) wrote:

The next outrageous idea is bound to be a special tax that will be imposed on everyone in order to make sure that we get a guaranteed pension at retirement. Ha, ha, ho, ho. And wait a minute. How about pooling our money to make sure that we all get medical care. Ha, ha, ha...I'm killing myself, phew.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:56:03 AM

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UJ walsh (Justdoit) wrote:

Looks like it is really busy....I have never seen anyone use them....what a JOKE!

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:52:29 AM

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Ira Wing (irawing) wrote:

This feels very much like "wrong idea, right problem" sort of thinking. It's a guilt tax, which is more the province of a church than a solution to a very real problem. The entire carbon offset thing feels too much like another opportunistic greenwashing effort with nebulous benefit.

While I personally acknowledge this is an issue, I don't feel the need to be bleeding edge in paying for my offsets at a kiosk in an airport.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:47:27 AM

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Joe Torres (JFTorres3) wrote:

So what confuses me is that someone is paying for carbon that will be trapped by a tree. If the person does not pay this, will they turn the tree off for a day until someone else pays? Will the tree stop trapping carbon and releasing oxygen if they don't have enough donors at the kiosk? These things rarely say where the money actually goes. If the statement was made that donations pay for acquisition of additional land, or even paying for taxes and management fees, I could see this as being valid... but that's not the case.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:42:03 AM

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Chewbacca the Wookie (Chewie) wrote:

Environmentalism isn't just for the left. The foundation of the economy and society is the environment. So, if we degrade the environment, we will lose the ability to sustain the economy and society.

You can't be conservative without conserving. What's really foolish is thinking we can just take and take from nature forever, without any consequences. Thoughtful conservatives like Arnold Schwarzenegger already understand this.

Is Arnold Schwarzenegger the smartest person in the GOP?

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:38:49 AM

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Tim Lago (timxcd) wrote:

I am all for trying to save energy and reduce emissions, but this is just silly, it is just a new form of religion in my opinion, where a governing body, (the carbon off set folks), try to get the masses, (us), to feel some form of guilt so that we have to go to confession, (the kiosk), to pay them for our sin of using a method of transportation that creates emissions. When they don't really have to do anything substantial with the money and we are too in a hurry to ask what the money is used for, but with some slick marketing they have tried to instill some guilt in the everyday traveler so paying is the only way to "feel good" about traveling again. Just silly....

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:35:12 AM

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Kevin Cronin (ClovisKevin) wrote:

What's the old saying, "a fool and his money are soon parted".

BTW, it not people that will "find" clean energy sources (though than may demand them). It will be up to those that may the means such as big oil, govt. and industry (such as cars, if allelectric cars are the only ones being sold then guess what we would buy).

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:31:29 AM

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Chewbacca the Wookie (Chewie) wrote:

Carbon offsets for air travel are critically important. There is no such thing as a clean airline. The people who buy these things are doing something good for society: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY for their pollution. We should be thanking them, not insulting them. As usual, San Francisco is ahead of the curve on the environment.

It's absolutely true that more needs to be done to verify the fact that offsets really occur. This is one of their key drawbacks. It results from the fact that the idea is so new.

It's ignorant to say we shouldn't care about greenhouse gas emissions because we all exhale carbon dioxide. The dose makes the poison. The amount of CO2 we exhale is tiny compared to the amount we emit by burning fossil fuels.

Ignorance isn't a very solid basis for public policy.

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 10:30:23 AM

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