

Metroland
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Green xmas

Need a gift for the environmentalist who has everything? Think carbon

The nonprofit Adirondack Council is offering a unique and “green” gift-giving solution this holiday season, the opportunity to keep tons of carbon dioxide emissions out of the atmosphere. The eco-conscious shopper can now purchase certificates guaranteeing the reduction of enough carbon dioxide to cancel out the environmental cost of driving a car for six months (\$25) or even eliminate the carbon footprint of a friend or loved one for one year (\$175).

The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, the first federally mandated carbon-dioxide control program, requires companies producing carbon emissions in 10 Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states to bid on allowances for every ton of carbon they release. These allowances can be traded among companies once purchased, but no more will become available. This is the essence of a cap-and-trade system. Each year, the number of allowances available is reduced, requiring companies to gradually reduce their emissions in the region as a whole. Of the participating states, New York has purchased far and away more allowances than any other state; nearly double that of the second largest purchaser, Maryland, and well over twice the emission allowances for New Jersey in both 2009 and 2012.

Enter Adirondack Council.

“We realized that we could make the power companies clean up their emissions even faster if we went to those auctions and started bidding against them for allowances,” said executive director Brian Houseal. “They tried to keep us out by setting the minimum purchase at 1,000 allowances. So, we sought partners by asking our members and the general public to help us, through the Carbon Reduction Certificate program.”

The council is selling certificates for \$25, tax-deductible. That \$25 purchases a certificate that explains “the significance of real carbon dioxide emissions,” and contains serial numbers correlating to 3 tons worth of allowances that have been retired. Three tons of carbon dioxide, according to Houseal, is equal to the cost of heating your home for one year or driving a car for six months.

John Sheehan, director of communications at the Adirondack Council, said that the beauty of the plan lies in the fact that the money paid for emissions allowances goes to the Energy Research and Development Authority and is reinvested in clean energy and efficiency, rather than paid directly to companies as an incentive to directly reduce pollution (a policy that worked against the foundering European cap-and-trade experiment).

Another allure of the program is that the results are more easily verified than those of carbon-offset programs, such as planting trees.

“These are real, verifiable emissions reductions,” explained Houseal. “Once we retire the allowance, it can never be used by anyone to create pollution. It is the same thing as reducing the regional pollution limits imposed on power plants, three tons at a time.”

Allowances, according to Sheehan, “are like stocks or bonds. They can be resold and have cash value.”

When an allowance is retired, it’s placed into a retirement account with RGGI, and the Adirondack Council promises never to resell it. There is only “our promise to the public and our reputation” as a guarantee, admitted Sheehan, but pointed out that that reputation is based on nearly 35 years of advocacy.

Contributions made to the Carbon Reduction Certificate program go toward purchasing allowances, recouping costs and supporting programs. One such program is the promotion of the expansion of RGGI to the other 40 states.

“We would like to see a nationwide program adopted by Congress based on this model,” said Sheehan, noting that some states on the West Coast already have a similar program under way. “We call this Reggie; maybe they’ll call that Weggie.”

In the first year of RGGI auctions, the Adirondack Council bought 7,000 tons of emissions allowances, 1,000 of which were retired a mere eight days before Christmas. According to Sheehan, the council intends to purchase 3,000 allowances at the Dec. 2 auction, and they hope to have most of them retired by the end of the year. Of the 5,000 allowances purchased this year, nearly 4,000 already have been retired.

As costs are recouped over the holidays, Sheehan hopes to have 9,000 tons retired by the end of the year. The first Carbon Reduction Certificate was purchased by U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) while she was still New York’s 20th Congressional District congresswoman.

Certificates can be purchased at adirondackcouncil.org.

—Ali Hibbs