

Green & growing

7-year-old Climate Wise boasts 45 partners

By TOM JOHNSON
ThomasJohnson@coloradoan.com

Never mind the question of whether global warming is real or imagined.

The city of Fort Collins Climate Wise program is helping local businesses reduce greenhouse gas emissions because it makes good business sense.

"We help companies achieve their cost savings and environmental stewardship goals, and they receive community recognition for it," said Climate Wise program coordinator Kathy Collier. "It's simple. If you reduce your waste, it saves you money."

Climate Wise is a voluntary city program available free of charge to Fort Collins businesses. By joining the program, businesses receive technical assistance in identifying, implementing, measuring, and reporting actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate Wise started in 1999 as part of the city's Local Action Plan to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions, which evolved in response to the city's overall climate protection policy, adopted by City Council in 1997.

The aim of the original climate protection policy was to reduce the city's greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent, from the 3.5 million tons of carbon dioxide anticipated to be released in 2010 by Fort Collins businesses, individuals and organizations.

"Climate Wise is the business subsection of this overarching plan," Collier said. "Climate Wise has already exceeded our 2010 goals, whereas the city as a whole is not yet halfway there."

Collier said the city's problems in reaching its target have been compounded by population growth and other factors, and the city plans to revisit its goals and action plan.

Meanwhile, Climate Wise is enjoying a rapid increase in program membership and is exceeding expectations set by city staffers in 1999.

By the end of 2000, the program had only 10 partners. Now, 45 businesses have joined Climate Wise, from small businesses, such as Ben & Jerry's and the Moot House restaurant, to the city's largest organizations, such as Colorado State University, Poudre Valley Hospital and Hewlett Packard.

"There are new program developments in place, and we're always improving them," Collier said. "This makes the program more attractive to partners."

Collier said the program has also grown in terms of the benefits offered to businesses, including the availability of more networking events, seminars and publicity opportunities.

By the end of 2005, Climate Wise partners had achieved quantifiable reductions of more than 95,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year, the primary compound implicated in climate change theories. The original goal of the program was to reduce emissions by 93,390 tons per year by 2010.

In addition, the Climate Wise program has expanded to include numerous pollution prevention measures, from energy reduction and water conservation initiatives to transportation plans and recycling and waste reduction programs.



Courtesy City of Fort Collins Natural Resource

John Armstrong, city environmental planner, discusses waste reduction ideas with Will Mitchell, owner of European Motor Cars Inc., during a Climate Wise technical assessment.

It can all be equated to equivalent reduction of greenhouse gases, and ultimately, to money savings and a feeling of good stewardship, Collier said.

Odell Brewing has been a partner in Climate Wise since 2000. Owner Doug Odell said the program is as important to his employees as it is to the business.

"Climate Wise helps us with structuring and maximizing our solid waste recycling and natural resource use reduction programs," Odell said. "This results in a feeling of positive contribution by Odell Brewing employees, as well as measurable cost savings."

Climate Wise promotional materials equate the success of the program in terms of units saved. For instance, Climate Wise partners:

- Recycled more than 5,000 tons of material in 2004, equivalent to the weight of 362 large city buses, or the weight of 833 elephants.
- Saved more than 10 million kilowatt hours of electricity in 2004 that was fueled by 8 million pounds of coal. This coal would fill 500 large tractor-trailer dump trucks and could be compared to saving the energy used annually by about 1,400 homes.
- Saved \$1,743,034 in 2005 through waste reduction with only 50 percent of companies reporting.

The program is limited in what it can actually achieve, said Collier, in that membership and participation in the program are wholly voluntary, and program team members can only make recommendations.

"It's up to businesses to decide whether to implement the team's suggestions," Collier said. "We help implement them as well, and can help quantify the information that results, so they can report their data. The more they participate and the more active they are in the program, the more benefits they can receive, such as public relations opportunities."

Collier said businesses themselves are sometimes limited in what they can do when it comes to improvements that require substantial investment. But through cost rebate programs designed to assist businesses with capital expenditure-related improvements, the Platte River Power Authority and Fort Collins Utilities can help businesses achieve more than they might have realized was possible.

The Neenan Company started working with Climate Wise last December. With assistance from program team members and the Brendle Group, a local energy efficiency consulting company, a greenhouse gas baseline was created to determine how much carbon dioxide Neenan's operations released to the environment.

"The baseline study identified areas we could look at to make improvements," said Annie Lilyblade, interior designer with the Neenan Company.

Based on recommendations from the Climate Wise team, the Neenan Company put together an implementation plan that included improving or replacing older, less efficient lighting fixtures; installing waterless urinals and dual flush toilets throughout the building; remodeling two large conference rooms and creating a collaborative work space to reduce the amount of air travel needed; and accelerating and improving the company's recycling efforts.

"As these improvements are made, we will calculate a new greenhouse baseline," Lilyblade said. "After we have the new figure, we will look at ways to make our company 'climate-neutral' by purchasing wind power or carbon tags from the savings to our operating expenses."

Lilyblade said the benefits of participating in the Climate Wise program are numerous.

"It's a combination of things," she said. "Of course, we want to improve our bottom line, but there's an environmental aspect as well. And as a designer and builder of structures, we're a special case. We're looking to test out these recommendations so we can share the information with our clients. We're using our building as a case study."

Fort Collins' Climate Wise program has garnered national attention. Last August, Outside Magazine published an article that named Fort Collins as a top environmental city, exemplified by the Climate Wise program.

Originally published July 9, 2006