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PG&E to fund forest projects

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Last year, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. gave its customers the option of going carbon neutral, voluntarily paying a little extra on their monthly bills to fund projects that reduce greenhouse gas levels.

Today, the utility will announce which projects will get the money.

San Francisco's PG&E will use cash from its ClimateSmart program to fund the restoration and management of two California forests, one in Santa Cruz County, the other on the state's North Coast. The trees - mostly coastal redwoods - will soak up carbon dioxide from the air, offsetting some of the gases produced by the power plants that provide PG&E customers with electricity.

The amount of money changing hands is small by the standards of the utility industry - only about \$2 million. That cash, however, should help remove 214,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases from the air. That's roughly equivalent to taking almost 40,000 cars off the road for a year.

It also means that the 17,500 PG&E customers who have signed up for the ClimateSmart program will have offset all the carbon dioxide emissions associated with the electricity and natural gas they consume. Participating customers pay an average of \$5 per month over and above their regular bill. They receive nothing in return, except the satisfaction of helping the environment.

"What's the customer getting? First and foremost, they're being made climate neutral," said Wendy Pulling, PG&E's director of environmental policy. "Second, they're getting to participate in restoring some of California's beautiful native forests."

Becoming climate neutral or carbon neutral has become a badge of honor among some environmentalists and has spawned a small industry of companies that offer similar services to ClimateSmart. Typically, such companies allow consumers to calculate the amount of greenhouse gases produced by their cars or homes or air travel plans. Consumers can then pay to offset those emissions, with the money going to fund windmill farms or reforestation projects.

The industry also has its critics, who view offset programs as a form of cheap penance for environmental sins. They note that some offset programs have spent money on environmental projects that would have happened anyway.

ClimateSmart tries to avoid that pitfall. The contracts PG&E signed with the owners of the two forests stipulate that the money must fund activities that wouldn't have happened otherwise. The forest projects must be certified by the nonprofit California Climate Action Registry, using criteria approved by the California Air Resources Board, a state government agency.

At the Garcia River Forest in Mendocino County, the cash will pay for the restoration of a woodland that was clear-cut at least twice in the past 100 years. The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group specializing in environmental land management, bought the forest from a timber company in 2004 and planned to continue some tree harvesting to pay for restoration and management.

Now, the ClimateSmart money will allow the fund to continue its work while removing fewer trees, said Chris Kelly, the fund's California program director. And the trees that will be harvested will be smaller trees that are crowding the forest and preventing the redwoods from growing to their full size. In the end, removing the smaller trees will help the forest produce bigger trees and absorb more carbon dioxide, Kelly said.

The ClimateSmart cash also will help maintain some roads in the forest and remove others, he said. Kelly said other forest managers should recognize the possibility that they can get money for preserving their trees, rather than cutting them for lumber.

"This could be a real breakthrough for forest management," he said. "It's a nice marriage of being a tree farmer and a carbon farmer at the same time."

In Santa Cruz County, ClimateSmart will fund maintenance of the Lompico Headwaters Forest, owned by the Sempervirens Fund.

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