

# Tracing and erasing

**As individuals and companies become more acutely aware of their carbon footprints, they are increasingly turning to a Swiss organisation to analyse and offset those CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. With a strong focus on standards, myclimate – The Climate Protection Partnership – has won a global reputation as a provider of high-quality carbon offsetting measures. *Swiss News* talks to myclimate managing director René Estermann.**

By Tom Armitage | But first, how did we get here? Carbon dioxide or CO<sub>2</sub>: a colourless, odourless non-flammable gas and the most prominent greenhouse gas in the Earth's atmosphere. Together with other gases such as methane, it is produced naturally and accumulates in the atmosphere, keeping the globe warmer than it might otherwise be.

For decades, some scientists have expressed concern over the rate at which CO<sub>2</sub> is released through the consumption of fossil fuels. One response to the perceived problem is to offset emissions through projects that neutralise the effects of additional CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere.

Carbon offsetting is when an organisation such as myclimate calculates the CO<sub>2</sub> output of everyday activities like driving a car or flying. The organisation then determines the financial equivalent of the emissions and recommends users pay a monetary donation toward a project that reduces carbon emissions by the

equivalent amount. To illustrate: A single flight from either Zurich or Geneva to New York would produce over one tonne of carbon dioxide – the equivalent to what an average tree might absorb over its full lifetime.

## Carbon offsetting pioneer

From a standing start as a spin-off of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich in 2002, myclimate racked up a carbon offset volume of SFr 7 million in 2008 and lists a number of international travel companies, the Coca-Cola Company and Greenpeace among its clients. It was recently recommended by Tufts University in the United States as one of the four best carbon dioxide offsetting organisations in the world – an endorsement of the organisation's focus on quality.

“myclimate was one of the first movers in this new market in 2002 when we started,” myclimate's Estermann told



# footprints

*Swiss News.* “The focus [was] that myclimate was always strictly on quality and on achieving the best possible standards for the kinds of projects that money was invested in.”

All the projects myclimate supports have to meet the Gold Standard criteria developed by the WWF (the Global Conservation Organization) and backed by more than 40 global non-governmental organisations.

These standards help ensure the projects are sustainable and long lasting. In addition, myclimate projects are registered with the United Nations and thus generate tradable emissions reduction certificates that may be purchased by companies or states to help them meet emissions targets. It was the first organisation in the world to achieve both the WWF and UN standards.

“These standards and the fact that all of our projects are externally verified, certified and registered mean that partners can rely on there being a real reduction in carbon dioxide made in the project,” said Estermann.

“In addition, they will ensure that this [is] done in a sustainable way and that it will benefit the local population either through measures that improve local working conditions or health conditions.”

## Global approach, global response

Pioneering projects supported by myclimate include the installation of solar greenhouses and micro hydropower plants in the Indian Himalayas, the provision of more efficient wood-burning stoves in villages in Cambodia and a wind power facility in Chitradurga, India. Closer to home, myclimate has supported a biomass project in Melchnau, near Bern, as well as a wind farm in Turkey.

The largest individual projects supported by myclimate will achieve emissions reductions of up to 1.5 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents over the next decade or so. In 2007, the organisation financed a total of 77,500 tonnes of emissions reductions through its projects.

The quality standards, the idealism that informs their approach and ultimately the scientific and business know-how that came with the ETH-trained founders of myclimate have lent the organisation the credibility required to build an international client list: its customers include Greenpeace, who offsets staff flights to international conferences through myclimate, as well as household names like Unilever, Volvo and Lufthansa. At the other end of the spectrum, private individuals utilise the organisation to offset their holiday flights.

## Did you know ... ?

The WWF (the Global Conservation Organization) estimates that globally, people consume about 25 per cent more natural resources than the planet is capable of replacing.



© myclimate

Two myclimate projects: building greenhouses in the Himalayas to reduce fossil-fuel dependency, and installing solar panels in Eritrea

### Branching out

Estermann belongs to the second generation of myclimate leaders, having joined the organisation in 2007. The pioneers established a strong scientific- and quality-based methodology and product range for the organisation, and ensured the client base included a wide range of international companies.

The second generation was then given the task of realising the organisation's potential and pursuing its options for growth by branching out into new areas such as consultancy and analysis.

"We started in 2007 with around six team members and now we are a team of 24 people," said the managing director, who limits his own carbon emissions by riding his bicycle to work, "thereby walking the talk". "We doubled the business every year in terms of turnover and emissions reductions and we have diversified from our pure focus on carbon offsetting to carbon management."

While carbon offsetting remains the organisation's core business, myclimate increasingly offers carbon management services to companies and institutions keen to quantify their carbon footprint and make efforts to reduce it. Working together with an energy consultancy, myclimate is able to identify what firms can do to cut emissions, and then recommend how best to offset the remainder.

The volume of offsets in money terms has risen from SFr 800,000 in 2006 to SFr 7 million in 2008. myclimate now

manages a large carbon-offsetting scheme for the WWF and Swiss supermarket chain Coop, as well as a series of offsetting measures for travel organisations, holiday operators and airlines.

Another major project has been the Principality of Liechtenstein's decision to use myclimate to meet its greenhouse gas emissions reduction obligations under the Kyoto protocol, becoming the first country in the world to do so.

The awareness among individuals is also increasing as more and more travel companies offer the additional option of offsetting the impact of holidays, car rentals or other forms of travel. In the future, myclimate hopes to better integrate this service into the products themselves so that consumers don't have to make separate transactions.

The split between corporate and private individuals is around 50-50, said Estermann. "We have about 2,000 or 3,000 people who send us letters saying they want to have a bill to cover the offsets for a particular activity."

### Green, or just greenwashed?

Carbon offsetting is not without its critics, however. Efforts to offset emissions through planting forests, for instance, have been discredited by some scientists who argue that such schemes are not sustainable due to the threats of deforestation.

So how does myclimate respond to the accusation that carbon offsetting is

merely seen as a way for polluting companies to 'greenwash' their activities?

"Of course, that is a risk," Estermann said. "However, we are seeing that through partners and clients, the commitments for a real change of strategy in terms of products and process has very much increased."

Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* marked a watershed in public perceptions of the issue. Followed by Lord Stern's influential *Review on the Economics of Climate Change* report in October 2006, the film is widely seen as having encouraged many to think about global warming and the carbon dioxide they produce in the course of their daily lives.

As a result, many individuals and companies started to look in earnest at offsetting the emissions associated with their activities, through organisations like myclimate.

"In the past two years – since the Stern report and the Al Gore film, the market for carbon offsetting has exploded," said Estermann. "In this time, we have not had to do any active marketing: the companies come to us."

### How it works for individuals

Someone taking that flight from Zurich to New York might choose to offset the CO<sub>2</sub> produced by the journey. At present, myclimate offers two options to neutralise the 1.4 tonnes of emissions: either investing solely in projects in developing coun-

tries for SFr 53 or spending SFr 160 toward projects that promote renewable energy and energy-efficient technologies – at least half of which will be spent in Switzerland.

An example of a Swiss project is a biomass plant that was built in the small Bernese village of Melchnau. It is intended to replace fossil-based heating systems for the village's 30 end consumers with a woodchip combustion unit.

The same offsets can be made for household energy, for travel by car or for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in general.

#### How it works for companies

myclimate offers different projects tailored to different kinds of enterprises: firms can choose to offset the emissions from employee travel, office space, production facilities or their company as a whole.

Event organisers can offset the impact of individual events, such as concerts or international conferences while

travel firms may choose to offer climate-neutral holidays and trips. Finally, firms can also choose to have the CO<sub>2</sub> impact of their products assessed and offset so that consumers can buy climate-neutral goods.

#### Migros and climatop

The climatop scheme and label were developed by Oekozentrum Langenbruck and myclimate as a means of identifying products that are 'climate friendly'. Migros, which as a company has already made significant commitments to reducing CO<sub>2</sub>, became a partner of the scheme in 2008.

myclimate assesses a range of products to calculate their CO<sub>2</sub> footprints. Products are then approved by the scheme if they are able to show a 20 per cent reduction in emissions over equivalent goods. While still in its infancy, Migros says it has plans to extend the scheme.

It currently features six brands in its

range, marked with the label of a green ring containing the words "approved by climatop" around the abbreviation CO<sub>2</sub>. Some products include a reusable shopping bag, as well as certain types of Total laundry detergent and Soft toilet paper ([www.climatop.ch](http://www.climatop.ch)).

#### Every little bit helps ...

The rapid growth of myclimate's carbon offsets shows that acceptance of carbon offsetting is growing. Backed by its high-quality sustainable projects, the Swiss organisation has in a short period of time made it to the forefront of the industry.

With the gradual spread of carbon offsetting measures from corporate travel to private mobility, more people have the option of minimising the impact that their lifestyle has on the environment. Closer to home, products with low carbon footprints, such as those sold by Migros under the climatop label, can also make a difference.

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