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UF Working Toward Being Deemed Carbon Neutral

The Neutral Gator Initiative does energy retrofits, tree plantings and bulb exchanges to offset emissions

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University of Florida fans can recite some statistics from memory, such as the number of touchdowns scored by Tim Tebow.

But here's a lesser known figure: During the course of this year, the university athletic program is expected to generate as much as 3,500 metric tons of the carbon emissions that contribute to climate change.

Now the program is working to be the first in the nation to be deemed carbon neutral. The Neutral Gator Initiative does energy retrofits, tree plantings and light bulb exchanges to offset emissions to a level equivalent to what is used by UF athletics. The University Athletic Association contributed \$25,000 to the effort, and fans also can buy offsets at a cost of \$10 a ton.

"When people buy a ton, they're supporting the Gators and they're also supporting these projects," said initiative co-founder Jacob Cravey.

Volunteers with the initiative and Community Weatherization Coalition made retrofits last week at the Village and Forest Green public housing complexes in northeast Gainesville. They insulated hot-water pipes, installed low-flow shower heads and noted bigger problems for maintenance workers to address later.

After holding a carbon-neutral football game in 2007 and carbon-neutral home football season in 2008, this year's goal is offsetting emissions from all UF athletic facilities, sports-related travel and association operations. Athletic Director Jeremy Foley said the effort uses the highly visible program to send a message about sustainability.

"It's just the right thing to do," he said.

The program's energy use will be measured over the course of this year but is expected to produce from 2,500 to 3,500 metric tons of emissions.

The apartment retrofits should save 1,000 tons of emissions, and the remainder will be offset through other energy-saving projects and tree plantings, Cravey said.

Such offset programs have their critics. A report by the group Carbon Trade Watch compared them to indulgences for sins granted by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The report found that some projects, such as a failed mango planting meant to offset emissions from producing an album by the band Coldplay, were poorly monitored and didn't have the desired impact.

Tree plantings are intended to offset emissions by removing carbon dioxide from the air. But the amount of carbon sequestered through a tree planting is harder to pin down than quantifying the energy saved by an efficient light bulb, said Ted Kury, director of energy studies at UF's Public Utility Research Center.

"You might not see the impact of that tree for five years or 10 years," he said.

Gainesville-based International Carbon Bank and Exchange President Mark van Soestbergen said skepticism is warranted because of some experiences with offsets, but his company does the work to back up Neutral Gator's claims. The accounting firm Purvis Gray and Co. signs off on its work.

"It's about the integrity of the program and the efficacy of the program," van Soestbergen said.

The company documents the emissions created and reduced. It anticipates that some projects might face issues, such as a certain number of trees dying in forestry projects. In light bulb exchanges, residents trade in their old bulbs to ensure they use efficient compact fluorescent models.

This year, UF's Program for Resource Efficient Communities is documenting the energy used by apartment residents before and after the retrofits. The effort provides local benefits, as opposed to far-away energy projects funded by some offset efforts, said Anna Prizzia, UF's sustainability director.

Rob Brinkman, head of the local Sierra Club chapter, said offset programs have flaws but are better than nothing. At the very least, he said, they raise awareness about climate change.

"We cannot do too much to get involved in a conversation about this issue," he said.

The work at Village and Forest Green included an education component, letting residents know settings that would optimize energy efficiency. Workers showed residents how to use features such as a faucet with a shut-off valve, allowing them to keep water warm without wasting it. Such features save water as well as the energy needed to heat it.

Resident Bernice Scott, 71, said her monthly electric bill has exceeded \$300, eating up nearly half of her Social Security check. She was hoping for significant savings on her next bill.

"Maybe I can buy a new church dress," she said.

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