

Black Christmas

Carbon overconsumption melts North Pole

Tis the season to go shopping, but with the North Pole melting, over consumption could land you on Santa's naughty list.

A report for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality this summer added up 78 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent association with the consumption of goods and services in the state. The DEQ-funded report from the Stockholm Environment Institute represents the first ever such state tabulation of greenhouse gas emissions from consumption.

The report found that with a large number of goods imported to Oregon and the state running largely on carbon-free hydro power, 54 percent of the pollution from Oregon consumption is released out of state with the rest in-state.

The state Legislature has set a goal of reducing Oregon's in-state emissions of greenhouse gases by 10 percent less than 1990 levels by 2020 and 75 percent less than 1990 levels by 2050. But the Legislature has not passed firm laws to actually achieve that goal.

According to a state study, Oregon's average temperatures could increase 4 to 14 degrees by the end of the century with catastrophic effects including coastal inundation, water shortages, wildfires, declining salmon and insect plagues.

The consumption study based its estimates on federal numbers on production and consumption by dollar amounts for various sectors of the economy and then translated the dollar amounts to greenhouse gas emissions using multipliers established by other researchers.

The study attributed about half of consumption pollution within the state to the use of fuels, mostly for driving but also for heating and powering other appliances. In buying a car, about 14 percent of the total pollution comes from producing the actual vehicle, while 86 percent comes from fueling it over its lifespan.

Buying food and beverages represented about half as much pollution as driving, according to the study. Animal products represented about 38 percent of the food global warming pollution. Going vegan would reduce average global warming impact by about 5 percent. That's about the same pollution savings as not buying and using any electronics or biking instead of driving once a month, according to the study.

Not wasting food could have a big impact. The study reported that almost 40 percent of food is wasted by consumers, retailers or producers. Composting waste offers far less pollution savings than not wasting the food to begin with, the study reported.

Not buying and using electronics reduced pollution about the same as not buying and using any lights and light fixtures.

Per dollar spent, airplane flights produce about eight times more warming

pollution than services such as concert tickets or massages, the study found. Buying new clothes is about five times more polluting than services. Buying new appliances is about three times more polluting.

Buying locally produced products helps the local economy, but the study found that "transportation of goods and services is a relatively minor contributor to Oregon's consumption-based emissions."

Transporting food represents only 11 percent of its pollution, the study found. However, it's unclear if the study considered the increased cost of packaging and spoilage. The study found that Oregon-made furnishings have half the warming pollution of imports.

If more manufacturing happened in Oregon using hydropower, it could reduce warming pollution if it displaced consumption of goods produced with coal-fired power. With most likely rivers already dammed in Oregon, the state likely couldn't produce a lot more hydropower, the study found. But still, added power production in Oregon produces less than half the carbon pollution per kilowatt as in China.

But per person, Oregonians produce about seven times more consumption related global warming pollution as people in China. Oregonians are three times more polluting than the world average per person.

There are ways to cut back. Oregonians could cut climate pollution by 3 percent if they all bought appliances that are 25 percent more efficient. Or people could achieve the same pollution reduction by waiting twice as long to buy new furniture or clothing, according to the study.

If a quarter of all drivers drove a hybrid instead of the average sedan, state warming pollution would drop 3 percent, according to the study. If half of all drivers simply biked, walked, bused or carpoled one day a month, that would result in about the same pollution reduction, according to the report data.

In compliance with a new state law, Portland is planning a scenario to reduce global warming pollution by, among other things, not building more freeways and arterials, quadrupling transit use, increasing bike mode share to 30 percent, and not sprawling by holding the urban growth boundary.

Eugene is beginning a similar scenario planning effort through the Metropolitan Planning Commission. But the scenarios are non-binding and Eugene is also pursuing hundreds of millions of dollars of new freeway projects and looking at expanding the UGB by about a thousand acres.

Do Oregonians actually care about getting a lump of coal consumption in their stockings? A 2009 survey by PolicyInteractive Research and Tom Bowerman found 82 percent agreement with the statement: "Our country would be better off if we all consumed less." **EW**

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