

Carbon greenwash by companies

Mark Dunn

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NO extra trees were planted in a dozen carbon-offset programs despite being marketed to Australian consumers as a way to counter global warming.

An ever-increasing range of companies, from car makers to airlines, are promising consumers they will plant trees to offset the carbon impact of their goods or services.

But the Federal Government has identified up to 12 programs in the past year where, despite companies telling consumers they would plant trees, no seedlings were planted.

None of the companies will be prosecuted for false advertising because their mistakes were unintentional, a government official said.

The shortfall arose because the companies failed to distinguish between trees they pledged to plant as carbon offsets and those trees already being planted in reforestation programs.

"The issue of validation and substantiation is incredibly important, people don't want to be investing in hot air," RMIT adjunct professor Alan Pears said.

Prof Pears said it was important consumers had confidence in the process so carbon-offset programs, including tree plantings, continued to expand.

"It's a time when everyone is learning and people are making honest mistakes, and some people are rorting the system," he said.

"We need to be making these things transparent and working through the issues, but at the same time we need to be careful about blame, there is so much confusion."

Consumer organisations are concerned some companies are overstating their environmental marketing claims, a practice known as "greenwash".

A review of environmental claims has found:

ELECTRICITY companies were last year fined \$600,000 for failing to buy renewable energy credits as required by law.

LG ELECTRONICS Australia was last year forced to pay up to \$3.1 million in rebates to consumers who bought 15,000 air conditioners with inaccurate efficiency rating labels.

THE Department of Transport is investigating cases of some car manufacturers' potentially inaccurate claims about fuel efficiency. Hagemeyer Brands Australia was also forced to stop advertising certain Dimplex air conditioners as "environmentally friendly" in 2005 and 2006 because they contained a refrigerant categorised as a potent greenhouse gas.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has taken action a number of times against companies making inaccurate or unsubstantiated environmental claims.

"It's a growing area we are keeping a very close eye on at the moment," ACCC spokeswoman Lin Enright said.

Consumer Affairs Victoria has dealt with three recent complaints, including claims about the environmental credentials of one and green pressure marketing tactics used by others.

The Climate Group, a non-profit organisation, will in coming months launch a global standard for carbon offsets, including tree plantings.

TCG's Australian director Rupert Posner said the instance of companies failing to plant additional trees for each consumer good or service sold was a concern.

"Most of the companies providing offset products are legitimate but there are a couple that are not," he said.

The Australian Greenhouse Office, a government body, runs a greenhouse-friendly accreditation standard, which ensures carbon-offset programs are audited and achieve what they promise.

But the AGO accreditation is voluntary.

<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,22162040-661,00.html>