

Sustainable Community Program

Frequently Asked Questions

Paper or plastic? Bus or car? Old house or new? Cloth diapers or disposables?

Some choices have a formidable impact on the environment while others are negligible. Only a few activities--our use of cars and trucks, consumption of meat, and choice of homes and appliances--are responsible for causing the greatest amounts of environmental damage by far.

The Union of Concerned Scientists analyzed the impacts of household spending on present levels of air pollution, water pollution, alteration of natural habitats, and global warming. After grouping 134 consumer spending choices into 50 categories (such as furnishings, clothing, and computers), the researchers discovered that the highest levels of environmental degradation are linked to just seven categories:

- cars
- meat
- produce and grains
- household appliances and lighting
- home heating and cooling
- home construction
- household water and sewage

Cars and light trucks (including minivans and pickups) cause the highest amount of environmental damage overall--nearly half of the toxic air pollution and more than a quarter of the greenhouse gases traceable to household consumption. "Driving less and using a cleaner car are the best things people can do for the environment," says physicist Michael Brower. "Because cars cause so much harm, even modest changes matter."

Maintaining our present food supply is second only to transportation as a source of consumer-related environmental damage. "Consumption of red meat causes a particularly high degree of damage for the nutrition it delivers," says Brower. "Replacing beef with grains and produce, or even chicken, can significantly improve the environment. People can help the environment by buying organic foods, too."

Why does the City sponsor a Community Sustainability Program?

In its complex, multi-faceted role as a large consumer, public service provider, land developer, and resource manager, the City has many opportunities to influence the financial, environmental and social future of this region. In actions taken from 1994-2001, the City's policies and programs have already reduced greenhouse gas emission by nearly 1.2 million tons of CO₂, which is about 30% of the total 4 million ton target for 2010. These actions, combined with those of

businesses, organizations and individuals, can provide the leadership and inspiration for continued success.

What is an easy thing I can do at home or at work to make a difference?

There are a number of things commonly discussed, such as recycling of paper and beverage containers, and conserving our use of water and energy as much as possible. Here is something new to think about, especially for coffee-drinkers!

More and more coffee farmers are clearing land for sun-tolerant varieties of coffee beans, and a massive amount of chemical pesticides and fertilizers are used. This not only destroys habitat, but also creates new costs to small-scale farmers already squeezed by falling coffee prices.

Fair-trade coffee can offer these farmers a way to keep their land, feed their families and promote sustainable agriculture. Fair-trade coffee certifies that farmers are getting a fair price (currently about \$1.25/lb.) for the coffee they grow. Fair trade organizations work directly with small farmers to cut out the cost of the middleman and keep prices reasonable for consumers.

So the next time you choose your coffee, remember the three terms that really matter: "shade-grown," "organic," and "fair trade." They mean environmental stewardship, education, healthcare, and community development.