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## For Earth Day, here are five simple things you can do to help the planet

KIE RELYEA / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Want to help the planet this Earth Day? Take little steps. "Small choices make a big difference," said Katie Fleming, education coordinator with Bellingham-based RE Sources for Sustainable Communities.

Fleming and other environmental educators are telling people that small changes made by many can have a big impact.

"It adds up," Fleming said.

The everyday habits of people contribute more to greenhouse gases than the actions of business and industry, said Rhonda Hunter, the environmental education manager for the Washington state Department of Ecology.

"We're having a huge effect," Hunter said. "We can be a huge part of the solution."

Both Ecology and RE Sources have created Web sites that teach individuals how to reduce their carbon footprint, which is defined as the amount of carbon dioxide created from everyday activities.

As the most plentiful greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide traps heat coming from the sun and contributes to climate change. The U.S. has just 4 percent of the world's population but is responsible for 25 percent of greenhouse gases, Hunter said.

Here are five small things you can do to reduce your carbon footprint, and save a few dollars along the way.

**Park the car one day a week.** Vehicle emissions accounted for 42 percent of all community greenhouse emissions in Bellingham last year, Fleming said.

To help lower that rate, leave your vehicle home once a week and take the bus, carpool, ride your bike or walk. If you can't, then make sure your vehicle is tuned up and the tires properly inflated to get the best miles to the gallon.

And take off that roof rack if you don't need it. Roof racks can cut a vehicle's fuel efficiency by 5 percent.

**Bring reusable bags** to carry home your groceries or other things you buy.

Some 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic shopping bags, which are made from oil, are used each year around the world, according to advocacy group Reusablebags.com.

Of that total, more than 380 billion plastic bags are used in the U.S. - for an average of five minutes, according to Ecology.

And paper bags are made from trees that would be absorbing greenhouse gases if they were still standing, Hunter said.

Plus, some supermarkets will take a few cents off your food bill if you bring your own bag.

**Turn off your appliances and electronics** when you're not using them, and unplug "energy vampires."

Such vampires are gadgets like TVs, DVD players and computers that continue to draw power to keep display clocks and memory chips going even when they're turned off.

Plug what you can into a power strip, then turn off the power strip when you're not using gadgets.

What's the big deal?

Fleming said the vampires suck up 5 percent of domestic energy in the U.S.

And home energy use contributes a little more than 20 percent of carbon dioxide emissions in Whatcom County, she added.

**Buy food that's grown or made locally** when possible. That way, less fossil fuel will be used to get it to you.

And with local farmers markets and farms revving up this time of the year, taking this step shouldn't be hard.

"This is a good place to eat healthy and make less of an impact with your food because we have so many resources," Fleming said.

**Recycle more, throw away less.**

Ecology says you can aim to reduce your trash by 10 percent. RE Sources says how about 25 percent, given that the average American generates five pounds of trash a day.

What's the big deal?

RE Sources says that Americans throw away 2 million plastic bottles every hour and trash enough aluminum cans annually to make 6,000 DC-10 airplanes.

You're probably already taking steps to help the planet by reducing your carbon footprint. Hunter hopes you'll do more.

"We're pretty green in the Northwest, and folks are more willing to take those steps," Hunter said. "If we're a little more mindful, we can make minor changes in our habits that have a big positive effect to help slow climate change."

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