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Editorial notebook: Shades of a global warming fix

Published 12:01 am PDT Monday, August 14, 2006

Story appeared in Editorials section, Page B4

To hear techies tell it, the solution to global warming rests in fancy gizmos. That's why some venture capitalists are getting very excited about wind turbines, photovoltaic batteries, methane recovery systems and hydrogen-powered cars.

That's all fine, yet there's a more low-tech way to combat global warming -- by planting trees. Millions of 'em.

Trees not only sequester carbon dioxide, but if you plant enough in strategic locations, their leafy shade significantly reduces the power needed to cool homes and offices in the summer. Less electricity means fewer greenhouse gases spewing from power plants and a cooler planet for everyone.

How much energy could trees save? Consider these numbers:

According to the Center for Urban Forest Research, a Davis-based institute affiliated with the U.S. Forest Service, the planting of 50 million new trees in strategic locations -- two on the west side and one on the east side of homes -- could save about 12,500 gigawatt hours of electricity in California each year once those trees reach their 15th birthday. That's equivalent to the juice generated by seven new large power plants or what is consumed by 683,000 homes each year.

Although it costs money to plant, water and maintain 50 million new trees, the payoff would be immense. Utilities could save \$462 million in wholesale electricity purchases each year, and residents would save \$1 billion in annual retail costs, according to the Forest Service. Peak-load demand on the grid would decrease 9 percent and air pollution would also be reduced, since utilities wouldn't need to run belching "peaker plants" to keep the power flowing.

My wife and I already benefit from two ancient sycamores that tower over the west side of our midtown Sacramento home. The trees keep the house remarkably cool on all but the hottest days. We have a single air-conditioning unit in our two-story house but rarely use it. Instead, we rely on a whole-house fan. Our electricity bill for July was just \$45, compared with an average of \$124 for a Sacramento home. (Some credit should also go to my wife, Micaela, who is fanatic in replacing light bulbs with compact fluorescents.)

The Sacramento Municipal Utility District promotes trees and maintains a Web site with a "tree benefits calculator." This calculator -- www.smud.org/residential/saving/trees -- tells you how much energy you could save, and how much carbon dioxide you could remove from the atmosphere, by planting certain trees around your house. According to SMUD, our two sycamores save 1,060 kilowatt hours of electricity a year and sequester 1,105 pounds of carbon dioxide.

In midtown, many of our old elms are succumbing to disease, and crews are taking them down. Fortunately, the city is replanting new species. Meanwhile, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and the Sacramento Tree Foundation -- www.sactree.com -- are working to double the region's tree canopy in the next 40 years.

Our stately trees are more lovely than a poem, but they also provide an environmental payoff we are just beginning to appreciate. As Joyce Kilmer might have written:

I think that I shall never see

A greenhouse gas reduction strategy as lovely as a tree.

-- **Stuart Leavenworth**
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