

Tread Carefully On Carbon Footprints

By Stewart Truelsen

In his beautiful poem “A Psalm of Life,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that we should leave behind “footprints on the sands of time” as we depart this world. If Longfellow were writing today, he might admonish us not leave any footprints behind, certainly not carbon footprints that are the result of using fossil fuels.

A carbon footprint is the total amount of greenhouse gases produced to directly or indirectly support human activities, usually expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Carbon dioxide emissions are linked to global climate change, and unless you lived before the discovery of fire, theoretically you are responsible along with the rest of humanity for global warming.

The bigger your carbon footprint, the greater is your contribution to carbon emissions and climate change. Thus, the carbon footprint is a very powerful tool to make someone understand the impact of personal behavior on global warming. The idea in a nutshell is to make people feel guilty about energy use and personally responsible. If you want to do your part to stop global warming, you should constantly calculate and monitor your personal carbon footprint—or so the theory goes.

We can all agree on reducing energy use, using clean, renewable fuels, conserving scarce resources and being good stewards of the environment. No one wants to be stomping all over Mother Earth with big carbon feet, but the whole idea of monitoring carbon footprints can be taken to troubling extremes.

An Oregon State University study concluded that a hypothetical American woman who drives a fuel-efficient car and saves energy in her home would still leave behind a big carbon footprint by giving birth to two children. Her carbon legacy is 40 times greater than what she saved with her green lifestyle because of her children. Does this mean a carbon tax should be imposed on parents, or they should be limited to a certain number of offspring?

As Roy W. Spencer wrote in his book *Climate Confusion*, “If governments (rather than people in a free market) can control what kinds and amounts of energy are acceptable, they will have vastly increased their control over the citizenry.”

There already are warnings of a massive increase in the federal bureaucracy and regulations if the House-passed climate change bill is enacted, but there is no telling where carbon foot-printing will ultimately lead us. One extension of it is Life-Cycle Assessment which has already been embraced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The assessment goes beyond the carbon footprint to determine the full-range of social and environmental consequences in the things we buy—including food and other agricultural products.

Whether it’s administered by government or in the hands of activist groups, the whole notion that we should live our lives according to what our carbon footprints tell us is deeply concerning. The calculations necessary to do that are exceedingly complex and subject to much interpretation. Carbon footprints could prove to be a foot in the door for hidden agendas.