

Carbon Offset Controversy at Phone Co-op AGM

by Chipping Norton, UK
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Today at the UK based Phone Co-op's Annual General Meeting, members revolted against the company's use of so-called "carbon offsets". Member Andrew Wood put forward a motion to discontinue the practice and called such offsets, provided by Oxford-based firm Climate Care, a "scam" warning fellow members that their use "seriously threatens the ethical reputation of our brand." He added that according to the Phone Co-op's own surveys, 70% of its customers move their telecom services to the company because of its rigorous ethics and environmental commitment. Wood stated that because of the controversial nature of carbon offsets, the Phone Co-op's reputation could be harmed. Wood was particularly concerned that another of Climate Care's customers was the airline giant British Airways who use the firm to "offset" their clients' flights. He found this unacceptable as "offsets mean that companies can continue polluting but say they are doing something for the environment. This could undermine the work of anti-airports campaigners and communities affected by local pollution."

Supporting Wood's motion was Adam Manit of the New Internationalist magazine who stated that offsets were a distraction from the real solutions to climate change, namely reducing pollution at its source. "Companies like BA use offsets to confuse the opposition while continuing business as usual. Ethical businesses such as the Phone Co-op should not be linking their brand to these controversial offset schemes but should be leading the way in real solutions to environmental and social issues."

Wood informed members that as environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace do not endorse the activities of companies like Climate Care, this could also become a danger to the Phone Co-op in the future as offsets start to be more directly opposed by campaigners. He also described the very nature of offsets as "fraudulent" with "little scientific credibility and highly dubious accounting practices."

Tom Morton of Climate Care had been invited along to the AGM by the Board of Directors to answer these criticisms. Morton defended British Airways claiming that the company is "leading the way in changing its environmentally destructive practices," adding that "Climate Care is a waste management service as there's a limit to how many emissions we can reduce in our lives, so we need to offset some." Vivian Woodell, Chief Executive of the Phone Co-op, also defended the schemes stating that, "We are already doing a lot in our activities to reduce emissions. Three quarters of our travel is by bus and rail. We see real social and environmental benefits from the carbon offsets schemes and don't understand why people are criticizing this."

Some Members were upset by the Board's introduction of a counter motion, which Andrew Wood described as a "wrecking motion", aimed at undermining the original proposal to discontinue the company's practice of using carbon offsets. As such, Members were not afforded the opportunity to vote on Wood's motion leaving only the Board's proposal left for discussion. After much confusion over what people were actually voting on, the Board's motion to support offsets was supported by 24 members, 9 of which were Board members with Wood's aims defeated by 7 votes.

Many of those attending the AGM seemed confused by the debate having had very little time to digest the issues and many people abstained from voting. New Internationalist's Adam Manit remarked that "This is not the last the Phone Co-op will see of this issue. Carbon offsetting is becoming more and more controversial and the debate will reach the Phone Co-op's AGM once again."

Links:

The Phone Co-op

Climate Care

New Internationalist magazine

Carbon Trade Watch

SinksWatch

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