



Your world Emission offsets

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Emission offsets, anyone?

That cry may replace the familiar "tennis, anyone?" around Houston country clubs and business board rooms. And, if the direst predictions come true, we may soon even have a Pollution Exchange Commission to go along with the stock market.

It was really no laughing matter, however, when the Texas Air Control Board last week finally and loathingly adopted the federal air pollution control strategy known as emission offsets.

The policy requires that, in excessively polluted areas such as Houston, more-than-offsetting reductions in existing air pollution must be secured before a major new industrial plant or expansion can proceed.

THIS WAS WHAT the Environmental Protection Agency came up with in an effort to allow some continuing industrial growth without further dirtying the nation's air.

Storms of criticism greeted the well-intentioned plan. So when the federal Clean Air Act was being amended last year, Congress pondered the issue long and hard — and came up with nothing better.

Emission offsets, at least for a time, became the law of the land.

The law is admittedly imperfect.

One glaring fault is that the program rewards industries that have been slow in cleaning up. These plants still have lots of pollution left for tradeoffs, while clean plants do not.

What he was saying in effect: Don't get too worked up over offsets, folks. There are much bigger problems ahead down the road.

The EPA, as directed by Congress, even now is looking at alternatives to offsets — new ways to use the lure of the dollar in controlling pollution.

ONE APPROACH UNDER STUDY would allow industries to "bank" pollution reductions for the future. Industry favors this plan, which is not permitted under present tradeoff regulations.

This would allow industries to install bigger and better pollution controls right away without losing the right to apply the pollution cuts against future expansions.

Other approaches under study are emission charges on air pollution and federal subsidies for better pollution controls on existing plants.

The EPA even has the Rand Corp. evaluating a scheme in which the government would sell, perhaps by auction, the right to use fluorocarbons that could escape and damage the earth's ozone layer.

AT LAST WEEK'S MEETING, air board chairman John L. Blair of Kountze observed bitterly that offsets will turn pollution control over to the polluters.

Other board members predicted the new strategy would wreck the state's own pollution control efforts and paralyze economic growth.

But board member Joe C. Bridgefarmer, a Dallas engineer, took a longer-range and less hostile viewpoint. He perceived emission offsets as a "chicken-feed" issue that was distracting the air board from more important matters.

The offsets program, he pointed out, expires on July 1, 1979, anyway under the air act amendments. That is only a year and a half away.

BY THAT TIME, Bridgefarmer pointed out, the state must adopt a broad new master plan for meeting federal air standards in both highly polluted and relatively clean areas.

"That is a much more strenuous and critical job than offsets," Bridgefarmer warned. "We've got maybe five or six cases (requiring offsets). I think they'll take care of themselves."

"THE MARKET, NOT the government, would thus determine which fluorocarbon uses should continue and which would be curtailed," an EPA source explained.

This commodity market approach to pollution control is peculiarly typical of the American Way of Life. But to many thinking people it is also repulsive — a sort of obscene financial trafficking in the public's health and welfare.

Yet, in the case of emission offsets, is it necessarily all that awful?

A case in point is a pending tradeoff proposal involving a new \$500 million terminal that Standard Oil of Ohio (Sohio) wants to build at Long Beach, Calif.

To offset sulfur dioxide emissions from the terminal, Sohio would spend millions of dollars installing "scrubbers" on one of two oil-fired electric generating plants that Southern California Edison operates in the Long Beach area.

TO BALANCE THE TERMINAL'S hydrocarbon emissions, Sohio would spend more money installing a vapor recovery system on one of the largest dry-cleaning plants in the Los Angeles Basin.

Under offset rules, there would have to be a net reduction in the air pollution plaguing residents of the Los Angeles area.

So if Sohio and its stockholders want the terminal badly enough to spend millions on other companies' pollution problems, and if the public benefits, is that really so horrible?

If this is emission offsets, Houston could use some.

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