Local News

UCSB pitches in to reduce, track campus emissions

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Students hope to lessen greenhouse gas emissions

With the federal government reluctant to take action on climate change, some people are taking matters into their own hands and figuring out how to reduce their impact on the atmosphere. UCSB is now among the entities that are tracking greenhouse gases -- which scientists have linked to global warming -- and are looking for ways to reduce their contribution to the problem.

The campus has joined the California Climate Action Registry, which means it will voluntarily track and report emissions of greenhouse gases -- stemming from electricity and gas used on campus, and commutes to and from the university by students and staff. UCSB is the second UC campus to be registered; UC San Diego was the first.

"This project's making a difference," said Todd Haurin, a graduate student at UCSB's Donald Bren School of Environmental Science & Management.

Mr. Haurin and four other Bren students, Fahmida Ahmed, Jeff Brown, David Felix and Betty Seto, spearheaded the effort. Their "Campus Climate Neutral" project is part of a grass-roots effort by the National Association of Environmental Law Societies to encourage graduate students to take the lead in addressing global warming.

While naysayers may argue that the threat has been overblown, the consensus among scientists is that global warming is a real phenomenon and a real worry.

Mr. Haurin said because the federal government has been reluctant to recognize global warming as a trend, let alone a concern -- as evidenced by the United States turning its back on the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions -- "we've been seeing this trend" of cities, organizations and companies taking action.

The Bren students have performed their own inventory of emissions, and UCSB's Physical Facilities staff is working on an inventory for membership in the California Climate Action Registry. That will be verified by a third party and submitted to the
registry, which was created by the Legislature to help companies and organizations track and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Perrin Pellegrin, UCSB's campus sustainability coordinator, said the process has been "pretty painless."

The emissions that are being tracked as part of the program are from energy used to power buildings and equipment, and from use of UCSB's vehicle fleet. The inventory that the Bren students are preparing also takes account of commutes by UCSB students and staff, which Mr. Haurin said can be estimated by looking at parking permits and ZIP codes, estimating distances driven and using an average figure for emissions from vehicles.

Mr. Haurin said "without a doubt" the biggest source of emissions on campus is linked to the energy required to keep buildings lighted and equipment running. But in many cases, there's not a lot students and staff can do to conserve energy because many labs must be powered up around the clock.

Nonetheless, Mr. Haurin said the student group is working out targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The ultimate goal, he said, is to make the campus "climate neutral," which could take a decade or two.

However, Mr. Haurin said that doesn't necessarily mean there would be no emissions. Instead, emissions that couldn't be eliminated would be offset through renewable energy purchases or by trading emissions credits. This free-market approach to the problem would allow entities with high emission levels to offset them by buying credits from others with low emission levels.

"Figuratively, you're achieving climate neutrality, but not in a literal sense," Mr. Haurin said.

Ms. Pellegrin said UCSB, which has an enrollment of nearly 20,000 students and employs more than 9,000 people, has already reduced its emissions by retrofitting lighting and mechanical systems so they use less energy. The university also has a team that looks for ways to minimize energy use on the growing campus.

Already, Ms. Pellegrin said UCSB uses less energy per square foot than any other UC campus.

Reducing energy use is part of UCSB's campus sustainability plan, which the university will be working on this academic year, Ms. Pellegrin said. It will also look at conserving water and improving landscaping and construction practices.

"I think we're holding the torch -- as far as sustainability is concerned -- for the UC system," Ms. Pellegrin said.