

Carbon Neutral / Carbon Offset FAQ

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“Although climate change action needs to be massively increased to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement [2015 international treaty on climate change to limit global warming], the years since its entry into force have already sparked low-carbon solutions and new markets. More and more countries, regions, cities and companies are establishing carbon neutrality targets.” ([United Nations Climate Change](#)) ALA is among those organizations taking action to reach this goal.

At ALA Annual 2021, Council approved [CD53 Resolution to Achieve Carbon Neutrality for ALA Conferences](#). The ALA Council Committee on Sustainability was charged with assisting and tracking progress toward this goal. This FAQ offers a very brief primer for those new to the conversation around carbon neutrality.

1. How is carbon-neutral defined? Is it different from “net zero” carbon?

- a. The term “carbon-neutral” is sometimes used instead of net-zero, and they broadly mean the same thing. The “net” part of net-zero means we can still emit CO₂ [through the burning of fossil fuels], as long as we offset (or remove) those emissions from the atmosphere by the same amount in other places. ([Jessica Allen](#))
- b. That task of getting to carbon neutrality or net zero is also easier to accomplish when efforts are made to reduce the overall carbon emissions in the first place (less carbon to offset).

2. What is a carbon footprint?

- a. A carbon footprint is a measure of the impact our activities have on the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) produced through the burning of fossil fuels and is expressed as a weight of CO₂ emissions produced in tons. ([WHO](#)). Nearly every activity we engage in generates a carbon footprint, small or large.

3. What is a carbon offset?

- a. A carbon offset is a credit for emissions reductions given to one party that can be sold to another party to compensate for its emissions. Carbon offsets are typically measured in tons of CO₂-equivalents and are bought and sold through international brokers, online retailers and trading platforms. ([David Suzuki Foundation](#))

4. Is using carbon offsets just a way to assuage the guilt of creating a carbon footprint?

- a. There is virtually no activity that we undertake in our personal and professional lives that does not create a carbon footprint. The only way to definitively not create a carbon footprint is to not engage in energy-intensive activities that create the footprint. Even virtual conferences need massive amounts of energy to run the technology that we all use to remotely attend those events. Carbon offsets provide a measurable, concrete action that addresses the climate

impact of our activities.

5. Are the offset impacts verified?

- a. Yes, if third-party certified offsets are utilized, the impacts are verified by the certification process.

6. Carbon offset projects tend to impact communities that don't have a strong voice. Response?

- a. ALA has full control over what carbon offset provider and specific project(s) it utilizes to offset its conference carbon footprint. ALA can prioritize, if it chooses, projects which arise out of and substantially benefit marginalized communities. Many of the [certified projects offered by Native, A Public Benefit Corporation](#) (ALA's current carbon offset provider) are domestic projects. These domestic projects are considered to have local impact to those living in that geographic region.

7. What are the primary contributors to a conference's carbon footprint?

- a. Carbon emissions fall into three main types (Scopes 1/2/3), and responsibility for these emissions is shared by conference venues and by attendees. ([EPA](#)). Electricity, heating and air conditioning, transportation, paper and other material use are just some of the ways that events and attendees can contribute to [carbon] emissions. Carbon neutral events work to mitigate the use of emitted carbon ([University of New Brunswick](#)). The three **primary** areas that make up an event's carbon footprint are: attendee travel (air, train, car), food, materials and venue energy with travel making up more than 75% of the total ([MeetGreen](#)). Choosing more sustainable transportation alternatives once at the conference site (walking/biking/public transit) can help reduce individual impact in a small way.

8. What is a carbon neutral conference?

- a. This can be best achieved through a hierarchy of actions that include aggressive reduction of energy consumption [including by attendees prior/during/after the event], followed by conversion to low or no impact energy sources, and finally through carbon offsets for the energy use that can't be eliminated. ([NREL](#))

9. Will working toward carbon neutral conferences affect ALA financially?

- a. Figuring out ways to reduce conference-related carbon emissions, including paying for carbon offsets for any conference-related carbon emissions that are not eliminated through other measures (e.g. using less carbon intensive modes of transportation getting to or during conference) is a cost of doing conferences sustainability and responsibly. ALA has already chosen to begin the move toward carbon neutral conferencing by paying to partially offsetting carbon emissions for Annual/Midwinter/LibLearnX for several years (since Midwinter 2020). ALA has the same options when it comes to covering this cost that they do for any other cost they take on.