
Environmental Almanac: UI making progress on conservation goals

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Let's face it; conservation is rarely sexy. And stories of conservation can be difficult to tell, because they typically lack individual heroes and often turn on doing less of something, not more.

To wit. Between fiscal years 2008 and 2014, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reduced its atmospheric carbon pollution (emissions, if you prefer) from 530,000 tons to 450,000 tons. That's 15 percent.

As an institution, we taught, housed and fed no fewer students, did no less research and outreach, and continued our world-class contributions to the arts and culture as before.

We even added the significant energy demands of the National Petascale Computing Facility to the mix. And still, we reduced our carbon pollution by 15 percent.

That means we've made significant strides toward carbon neutrality by 2050, a commitment we undertook in 2008 by signing the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment.

How did we make such strides? I spoke recently with Ben McCall to find out. McCall is a professor of chemistry at the UI who also holds an appointment as associate director in the Institute for Sustainability, Energy and Environment (iSEE), which was launched in December 2013.

McCall reminded me that roughly 90 percent of campus carbon emissions are attributable energy. "That's the big fish," he said, "So changes we make in energy usage, production and purchasing have the greatest impacts on emissions."

Conservation — that is, the energy we are not using — is the most important aspect of the energy picture, and "energy use intensity" (defined as energy unit demand per unit of floorplan) is the metric used to gauge that. Between 2008 and 2014, energy use intensity on campus was reduced by 20 percent.

McCall was quick to point out that the lion's share of credit for this reduction goes to the Retrocommissioning conducted by teams from UI Facilities & Services. "They're the ones who do the unglamorous work of going from building to building to tune up the mechanical systems, and that's where the biggest savings come from." (Those in charge of Retrocommissioning at F & S calculate the cost avoidance made possible by their work to be near \$22 million.)

The context for McCall's remarks about energy on campus was a broader conversation about the Illinois Climate Action Plan (iCAP), which was developed in 2010 and includes other targets relating to sustainability.

One of the important targets for 2015 that we've already reached is a 20 percent reduction in the use of potable water. (How about that, Mahomet Aquifer friends?) Another we're nearing is the purchase of 30 percent of the food used by UI Dining Services from local sources.

In his role at iSEE, McCall is coordinating the work of six recently established Sustainability Working Advisory Teams (SWATeams), which bring together students, faculty and staff who have interests and expertise in various aspects of sustainability. At present, these teams are finalizing assessments of where the UI stands on progress toward its pre-2015 iCAP targets, as well as developing suggestions for revising the plan in light of experience since it was adopted.

Members of the campus community and the public alike are welcome to learn more about the efforts of these SWATeams and offer input at a public forum set for 1 to 4 p.m. Wednesday in Room 314B of the Illini Union, 1401 W. Green St., U.

The forum is part of Sustainability Day on campus, which kicks off the night before with a screening of the film "Plastic Paradise: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

The film will be shown Tuesday and be preceded by remarks from director Angela Sun. Check-in is at 6 p.m., Sun will offer opening remarks at 6:30, and the screening will begin right after in Room 149 of the National Soybean Research Center, 1101 W. Peabody, U.

Rob Kanter is a lecturer with the UI School of Earth, Society and Environment. Environmental Almanac is supported in part by the UI Institute for Sustainability, Energy and Environment and can be heard on WILL-AM 580 at 4:45 and 6:45 p.m. on Thursdays.

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