

Ask Eartha Steward

Dear Eartha:

I would love to invest in solar panels and buy a hybrid car, but with the current financial situation, I don't have extra money to spend. Are there less expensive ways I can reduce my carbon footprint? - Julie from Breckenridge

Your question is right on the money, Julie. With the daily news being dominated by the credit crisis, high gas prices and the housing slump, virtually all of us are feeling a budget crunch. Today I'll talk about eco-friendly changes you can make for free (or way less than hybrid cars and solar panels) that will end up putting more money in your wallet.

1. **Eating less meat** is the easiest change you can make—and the healthiest for both you and the planet. 18% of human-caused greenhouse gases come from the livestock industry. Holy Cow—that's a high percentage!

Anytime you replace your meat intake with a plant-based alternative, you will reduce your carbon footprint. If all Americans went meat-free for just one day a week, it would be the carbon equivalent of removing 8 million cars from the road. And that's with just one meatless day each week. Imagine the impact if everyone had several days a week with no meat! As an added benefit, a vegetarian diet is kinder on your arteries, has lower incidences of cancer and greater longevity.

If you are the carnivorous type, the key is to remember that even small changes can make a difference. Start by eating smaller portions of meat at each meal, and then try to work up to making a delicious, meatless meal once a week.

But let's not lose focus: the best part of all of this is that meal for meal, eating lower on the food chain will almost always mean spending less at the grocery store.

2. Offset your carbon footprint by **supporting local energy projects through the Colorado Carbon Fund** (www.coloradocarbonfund.com). The Conservation Center has partnered with The Colorado Carbon Fund to help the Summit County community reduce our carbon footprint by offsetting emissions through a tax-deductible contribution. It is an affordable (and impactful) way to reduce (or offset) your carbon footprint while supporting local projects. To find out how you can participate, visit www.highcountryconservation.org.

3. **Turn down the thermostat** and put on a sweater. Lowering the temperature setting in your house by 2 degrees can cut your energy bill by 10%. With current energy prices, that savings will add up quickly over the winter.

That's the free part—for a small price, you can purchase an automatic or programmable thermostat. Set it to turn down when you are asleep or away from the house, and to turn back up half an hour before you wake up or return home. The only place you will notice

this change is by the savings on your energy bill, or maybe a little snuggling under the covers!

4. **Change your laundry habits.** You don't need to wash your clothes in hot water. Cold water does a fantastic job—really! 90% of the energy used in washing your clothes is to heat the water so eliminating this step is a huge energy saver. Then, eliminate your clothes dryer by air-drying your clothes. In Colorado's dry climate, clothes hung to dry in your house will dry overnight. You can set up a simple clothesline or purchase an inexpensive drying rack that suits your space.

I purchased an Antonius drying rack from Ikea for \$12.99 that has a pulley system so you can pull it up to the ceiling when it is not in use. Many other styles are available by doing an online search for drying racks. Depending on the number of loads you dry each week, you can expect energy savings of \$50-\$150 per year, all while doing your part to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

5. Make sure your **car tires are properly inflated.** Under inflated car tires can cut your gas mileage by 5%. You will save money on gas and be safer on the road too.

6. **Turn the thermostat of your hot water heater down.** For most people, the time you want the hottest water is when you take a shower. If you need to add cold water to the hot water to create a pleasant temperature, you are unnecessarily heating the water only to cool it back down. Try setting the hot water thermostat to 120 degrees and then experiment to see if it needs to be a bit higher or lower.

So there you have it! You don't have to spend a penny to make most of these earth-saving changes, and you could save hundreds of dollars.

Eartha Steward is written by Carly Wier and Jennifer Santry, consultants on all things eco and chic at the High Country Conservation Center, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to waste reduction and resource conservation in our mountain community. Eartha believes that you can walk gently on our planet, even if you're wearing style shoes.

Submit questions to Eartha at eartha@highcountryconservation.org or to High Country Conservation Center, PO Box 4506, Frisco, CO 80443.