

Put to Emissions Test, Va. Families Attempt Lower-Carbon Lifestyles

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If Americans really take the plunge and enter a carbon-constrained world, it might look a little like the Stokes family's home in Falls Church, Va.

Nolan Stokes and Kathy Harman-Stokes - a financial planner and a lawyer with two children in elementary school - are installing a geothermal heat pump in their front yard that will tap the earth's constant temperature to warm their home more efficiently. They know precisely how many kilowatts of energy their house is consuming when they wake up each morning. And they've cut back on their consumption of meat because they know it generates significantly more greenhouse-gas emissions than vegetables.

There is even an official name for the Stokeses, along with three other households in Virginia: Climate Pilots. They are participants in a Swedish experiment aimed at helping US citizens understand that a lifestyle that curbs greenhouse-gas emissions is not necessarily oppressive, just different.

Whether Americans are willing to follow their example is part of the political calculation lawmakers have to make as they consider imposing nationwide limits on emissions in legislation making its way through Congress.

Many Americans have adopted small eco-friendly measures, such as recycling and installing compact fluorescent light bulbs. Some have made more significant lifestyle shifts, commuting by public transportation or bicycle and adopting high-efficiency or renewable energy systems for their homes.

But it remains unclear whether there is enough grass-roots support for a dramatic change in US climate policy, especially during an economic crunch.

Sweden's deputy prime minister, Maud Olofsson, who visited the Stokeses' comfortable suburban home in November, told them and the other program participants that their example could change that.

"We are building something new," she said, sitting at the Stokeses' dining room table. "You are the leaders when you say to politicians, 'Now we are prepared to change.' We want you to be brave when you make decisions. Then they will do so."

The gap between American and European attitudes on global warming was on striking display during the recent UN-sponsored climate talks in Copenhagen. The Europeans had decided to impose constraints on themselves and were willing to accept them in an international agreement, while the Obama administration, for all of the president's interest in the issue, was wary of political backlash at home and pushed for a more modest pact.

The oil crisis of the 1970s prompted many European governments to shift direction, while Americans responded by briefly turning down their thermostats and driving smaller cars, then returning to old ways when oil prices came down.

Incorporating climate change into Danes' everyday thinking has been "a 35-year-long journey," said Niels Christiansen, president and chief executive of Danfoss, a Danish company that produces thermostats and other heating and ventilation components. "Now, I think it can be done quicker. But I don't think it can be done overnight."

It looks like a long road for Americans. In 2005, the United States emitted 23.5 metric tons of greenhouse gases per capita, according to data analyzed by the World Resources Institute, four times the world average. The 27-member European Union emitted 10.3 tons per capita, while Sweden came in significantly lower, at 7.4 tons.

In Kalmar, Sweden, 12 Climate Pilots cut their average greenhouse-gas emissions by nearly a third in one year. The entire city aims to be fossil-fuel-free by 2030. Six months ago, a handful of Kalmar residents started coaching four Virginia families, selected by the Swedish Embassy in Washington, on how they could do the same.

Their six-month challenge officially ended Thursday, and their Swedish climate coaches will be giving them a report card with the amount of greenhouse gases they kept out of the atmosphere.