

Sustainability: A Traditional Value

Sustainability is a newly recognized concept that has multiple definitions. One simple, useful, definition is that *what we do today should not cause a problem tomorrow*. This is a prudent, responsible attitude that should inform many of our decisions. It is also an expression of the University of Utah's traditional values of understanding the world as completely as possible and working for the future.

Many sustainability issues surround our use of energy. These include energy security with serious implications for our Nation's foreign policy; local air pollution that reduces life expectancy by 2 years and is especially harmful to children; and wild fluctuations in price that undermine our long-term investments. Moreover, as Mario Capecchi emphasized in his 2008 commencement address, an overwhelming scientific consensus holds that climate change is on track to cause serious and possibly catastrophic consequence in the lifetime of our current students. Additional concerns include other sources of pollution, challenges to food and water supplies, and loss of biodiversity.

What is the U doing about these challenges? First, President Young has formally committed the U to achieving climate neutrality and has launched the Office of Sustainability (<http://www.sustainability.utah.edu>). Students have also led by initiating a program that in 2009/10 will make almost 25% of the U's share of electricity come from renewable sources (<http://windpower.utah.edu>). This year students voted to make additional donations that will further energy efficiency and other sustainability initiatives on campus.

Donors also support sustainability. In particular, because 70% of the U's energy use occurs in buildings it is important that new and remodeled buildings achieve optimal standards of energy efficiency. As this issue's front-page story highlights, the new Sutton Geology and Geophysics Building has been built to a high LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standard. Other LEED standard construction projects include the Carolyn Tanner Irish Humanities Building and remodeling of the V. Randall Turpin University Services Building. As illustrated by the U's first LEED project, the Spencer F. and Cleone P. Eccles Health Sciences Education Building, the increased construction costs for LEED standards are small compared to the estimated 35% of energy saved over the ~100 year lifetime of the building. Moreover, LEED buildings provide a healthier environment for faculty, staff, students, and patients.

A final example of donor support, which extends globally, is the College of Humanities project to achieve climate neutrality by preserving rainforest in Costa Rica. Rain forests are home to ~50% of all species, their ongoing destruction causes over 20% of all greenhouse gas emissions, and they are on track to be completely lost when our current students reach middle age. In short, the concept of sustainability is a commitment to the future, and is therefore one of the U's most enduring values.

[Sustainability initiatives at the U include a farmers market, recycling programs, and a bicycle collective.](#)