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TRANSPORTATION

Airstream packs iconic 'silver bullet' with carbon offsets

Daniel Cusick, E&E News reporterPublished: Friday, February 12, 2021



Airstream Inc.'s silver bullet trailers have been a mainstay of U.S. highways for decades. The company says it wants to do more to offset its carbon emissions. Chris Yarzab/Flickr

A 90-year-old American icon is rolling out efforts to go green — silver-green.

Airstream Inc., maker of aluminum-clad "silver bullet" travel trailers, says it will offset carbon emissions from the manufacture and operation of new vehicles exiting its Jackson Center, Ohio, production facility this year.

The company will underwrite the planting of more than 118,000 trees under its "Caravan to Carbon Neutral" partnership with the National Forest Foundation. The plantings will help sequester a year of carbon emissions produced by the manufacture, sale and highway use of a new Airstream, officials said.

The offsets account for emissions from motorized coaches, built on Mercedes-Benz van chassis and costing as much as \$244,000, and towable Airstream trailers that range in cost from \$40,000 to \$162,000, according to the company's website.

"We are dedicated to leaving our natural world better than we found it. Addressing the causes of climate change is central to that mission," Airstream President and CEO Bob Wheeler said in a statement.

"Transportation accounts for an estimated 28% of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., so this is an area where we have a responsibility and an opportunity to lead."

The RV industry, a \$42 billion global market, has been slower than other transportation sectors to address carbon emissions, and Airstream's tree-planting effort is modest compared with some of its competitors. It also does not draw on skyrocketing interest in clean vehicles.

General Motors Co., Ford Motor Co. and even RV rivals like Winnebago Industries Inc. are making similar and larger investments in carbon reduction through electric vehicle development and greater use of renewable energy.

GM announced last month that it will seek to eliminate all tailpipe emissions from its vehicles by 2035 and achieve companywide carbon neutrality by 2040, in part through carbon offset programs. Ford last week said it would double its planned investment in EV development over the coming years, from \$11.5 billion to \$22 billion.

Ford also committed \$1 million to the National Forest Foundation through its new Bronco Wild Fund, which will draw income from sales of the rereleased Bronco sport utility vehicle.

In 2019, Winnebago introduced its first all-electric specialty vehicle for mobile medical units, mobile preschools, bloodmobiles and other uses, according to the company's 2020 corporate responsibility report. The EV can range between 80 and 125 miles per charge, far less than would be expected of a motor home.

Airstream's carbon offset plan follows a broader commitment by Airstream's parent company, Thor Industries Inc., the world's largest producer of RVs with more than 20 brands.

Late last year, the Fortune 500 firm committed to plant a half-million trees in national forests in partnership with the National Forest Foundation while renewing financial support "to ensure long-term vitality of National Forest lands for RV'ers and outdoor enthusiasts." Congress launched the foundation in 1992 as a nonprofit partner for the Forest Service.

Foundation President and CEO Mary Mitsos said one tree is planted for every \$1 donated, though the full cost of planting a tree in a national forest is closer to \$3. The foundation will plant roughly 8.1 million trees on national forests and grasslands in 2021 as part of a multiyear effort to plant 50 million trees.

Mitsos said Airstream initiated the offset program with the foundation to establish itself as a climate-conscious company as well as to help connect its customers with environmental issues. "It is a nice convergence of talking to their customers about carbon and stewardship of the lands they use," she said.

According to a recent customer survey, Airstream found that 96% of owners said they were concerned about environmental degradation. "The Airstream community has a symbiotic relationship with nature and the environment," Wheeler said.

But some environmental advocacy groups are skeptical of fossil fuel-dependent companies creating carbon offsets through tree-planting and similar programs.

"When it comes to alleged offsets, the devil is in the details," said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity. "If a tree is planted today, is it going to be there tomorrow? If another tree is going to be cut down every time a new one is planted, it's a complete joke."

Even before it was cool to be green, Airstream was celebrated for its shiny, sleek, rounded "fuselages" that created less drag and boosted highway fuel economy, even if the vehicles pulling them averaged 10 miles per gallon. In the 1960s, Airstream became famous for its deluxe Land Yacht model, which remained in the company's fleet until 2016.

Airstream trailers remain popular today and have benefited from an expanding RV market as families seek socially distanced vacations during the pandemic.

"Research shows that RV vacations can produce less carbon as compared to similar airline/rental-car/hotel itineraries. But we felt that we needed to do more," Wheeler said.

Airstream said the number of tree plantings necessary to sequester its 2021 carbon emissions was based on sales forecasts, a customer usage study, greenhouse gas equivalency calculators developed by EPA, Department of Transportation fuel efficiency estimates, publicly reported information from Mercedes-Benz, an aerodynamics study and tree carbon sequestration estimates from the Department of Agriculture.