

# From FIFA to the LA Clippers, carbon offset scandals are exposing the gap between sports teams' green promises and reality

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Under team owner Steve Ballmer, in the checkered shirt, the LA Clippers have cut their greenhouse gas emissions, but their carbon offsets raise questions.

*Ric Tapia/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images*

If you go to a pro sports event today, there's a good chance the stadium or arena will be powered at least in part by renewable energy. The team likely takes steps to reduce energy and waste. Some even claim to have net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, meaning any emissions they still do produce they offset by paying for projects, such as tree-planting, that reduce greenhouse gases elsewhere.

The venue upgrades have been impressive – Seattle's hockey and basketball arena runs on 100% renewable energy, makes its rink ice from captured rainwater, and offers free public transit for ticket holders.

But how much of the teams' offset purchases are actually doing the good that they claim?

It's an important question, in part because fans may ultimately pay for those offsets.



Lionel Messi of Argentina controls the ball during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final match. FIFA drew criticism for claiming the games were carbon neutral while relying heavily on sometimes questionable carbon offsets.

*Julian Finney/Getty Images*

The cost of carbon offsetting in sports varies by organization, with no industry standard for who pays. Some teams and leagues absorb costs through their operational budgets, treating carbon neutrality as a core responsibility. Others pass costs to consumers: Some teams add sustainability fees to ticket prices to offset each attendee's carbon footprint. The payment model ultimately reflects whether an organization views offsetting as an institutional obligation or a shared responsibility with fans.

Carbon offsets in sports are also in the news, with scandals erupting around them in connection with sports from FIFA's 2022 World Cup to basketball's LA Clippers.

As sport management researchers, we have been following offset agreements and other sustainability commitments that teams and sports leagues such as FIFA have been making to see whether they translate into measurable environmental outcomes. We see lots of good intentions but also a disturbing amount of failures and outright fraud.

## Where sports teams' emissions come from

The vast majority of a sports team's climate footprint comes from team's and fans' travel, which they have little control over. Leagues can reduce teams' travel somewhat with creative scheduling, but unlike other industries, sports teams have few ways to reduce the bulk of their emissions.

What many of them do instead is offset those travel emissions by buying carbon credits.

Carbon credits are generated by projects that reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere or prevent greenhouse gas emissions. Many of those projects involve planting trees to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere; others expand clean energy to reduce fossil fuel use. Each carbon credit is supposed to represent the reduction or prevention of one metric ton of carbon dioxide.

However, carbon offset projects have come under scrutiny in recent years. Tree-planting projects, the most common type, take time to meet their promise as the trees grow, and wildfires and logging can wipe out the benefit. Studies have found that companies tend to buy cheap, low-quality carbon credits, which run a risk of exaggerating their carbon reduction claims or providing results that would have happened anyway, leaving no real climate benefit.

Unfortunately, several teams, perhaps unknowingly, have been purchasing fraudulent or low-quality credits.

## Reputations at risk

FIFA brought the sports world's carbon offset problem into the spotlight during the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

FIFA claimed the event would be carbon neutral, but that claim relied on creative accounting that understated the event's construction and travel emissions. Organizers also used low-quality offsets. Many of those offsets were renewable energy projects with a high likelihood of being built anyway.

A year after the tournament, FIFA had completed offset purchases for less than a third of the World Cup's estimated emissions, the nonprofit Carbon Market Watch found. And Switzerland's advertising regulator ordered FIFA to stop claiming the World Cup had been "carbon neutral."



In 2022, the Boston Red Sox announced a plan to route a portion of the proceeds from every ticket purchased at Fenway Park to a carbon offset project run by Aspiration. Aspiration later went bankrupt, and a ProPublica investigation found it had planted far fewer trees to store that carbon than promised.

*Werner Kunz/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA*

The Clippers and baseball's Boston Red Sox ran into problems when they publicly partnered with Aspiration, a now-bankrupt finance technology company and carbon credit broker, to meet their "carbon neutral" claims.

The Clippers had a US\$300 million partnership with Aspiration that included paying the company at least \$56 million for carbon credits in mid-2022, The New York Times reported. Both teams also had plans with Aspiration to offer fans a way to buy carbon credits to cover their own travel when purchasing tickets.

However, Aspiration officials claimed to have supported millions more tree-plantings than what had actually happened, a ProPublica investigation found. Aspiration co-founder Joe Sanberg pleaded guilty in 2025 to wire fraud involving false statements about financing to secure loans and attract investors, who lost at least \$248 million.

The Aspiration partnership is also under investigation by the NBA over an endorsement deal the company made with Clippers all-star Kawhi Leonard at about the same time and questions about whether it was used to violate the league's salary cap. Team owner Steve Ballmer, who personally invested at least \$50 million in Aspiration, told ESPN he and the team did nothing wrong. "They conned me," he said.

While the scandal focused on financial fraud and the salary cap, it also raised questions about the team's sustainability claim.

## Without verification, who knows?

In some cases, the value of offset projects is difficult to verify, even when trees are being planted nearby.

The Seattle Sounders FC declared itself the first carbon-neutral professional soccer team in North America in 2019 by cutting its waste, water and energy use and offsetting its remaining emissions through the nonprofit organization Forterra, which plants trees in the Puget Sound region.

While the effort positioned the club as a sustainability leader, the offsets lacked what's known as third-party verification. Similar to how organic food must be certified by reputable agencies, third-party validation of carbon credits ensures credits truly represent the removal of carbon from the atmosphere or avoided emissions.

Without verification, it's unclear whether claimed emission reductions are permanent, accurately tracked and transparently reported.

## Potential legal consequences

Even the most prominent venues are susceptible to issues with unreliable credits.

Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle has been celebrated as the world's first "zero-carbon" certified arena, with electric Zambonis, recycled materials, renewable energy and free public transit. It represents one of the most ambitious pushes to develop sustainable sport infrastructure globally.



Hockey rinks need energy to keep the ice frozen. Seattle's Climate Pledge Arena has lowered its emissions with solar power from a local array and has even electrified its Zambonis. But reports have raised questions about the quality of carbon offsets it purchased.

*AP Photo/Maddy Grassy*

To offset unavoidable construction emissions, the arena's owner relied on carbon credits tied to projects meant to reduce rainforest loss in Colombia. However, an analysis by the carbon rating company Calyx Global found that while the arena's credits may prevent some deforestation, the numbers likely overstate the benefits.

A 2023 report suggested that over 90% of rainforest carbon credits from the leading certifier of offsets lack evidence that they reduced deforestation. The certifier disputed that conclusion but is working to revise its review process.

When credits fail to offset real emissions, that erodes public trust and can expose organizations to potential legal consequences.

Delta Air Lines, for example, is facing a lawsuit over its carbon neutrality claim. The suit alleges that Delta misled passengers by describing itself as a “carbon-neutral airline” while relying on carbon offset projects that were ineffective or “junk.”

## Time for some strategic reassessment

These and other failures in the carbon credit market suggest the industry needs to fundamentally reassess how sports teams achieve their climate goals.

To provide meaningful sustainability commitments, sports organizations and facilities can start at home by lowering their fossil fuel use and increasing their energy efficiency. Many arenas do this.



Fans walk under solar panels at NRG Stadium in Houston.

*Tom Pennington/Getty Images*

Leagues can design game schedules to reduce team and fan travel. Many of the Paris Olympics venues in 2022, for example, were connected by subway or bus. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, in contrast, has venues hundreds of miles apart across North America, meaning potentially higher emissions from fan travel.

Where offsets will still play a role, teams can ensure that they partner with verified carbon credit providers that deliver measurable, transparent carbon reductions.

In a field where public trust and reputation matter as much as performance, the sports industry cannot afford foul play on climate. We believe a shift toward strategies that cut emissions first, and then use only the most credible offsets, will be the difference between striking out and leading the sustainability game.

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