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Walmart's Sustainability Results Don't Match Promises, Report Finds



By Kate Sheppard



A customer pushes a shopping cart during the grand opening of a Wal-Mart Stores Inc. location in the Chinatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, U.S., on Thursday, Sept. 19, 2013. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. will phase out 10 chemicals it sells in favor of safer alternatives and disclose the chemicals contained in four product categories, the company announced Sept. 12. Photographer: Patrick T. Fallon/Bloomberg via Getty Images

WASHINGTON -- Walmart, the world's largest retailer, has received positive press in recent years for its promises to go green. The company began issuing an annual [Global Responsibility Report](#) in 2005. It announced plans to [slash emissions](#) in its supply chain in 2010. The company pledged this year [to expand the use of renewable energy](#).

But according to [a report released Wednesday](#), Walmart's green pledges remain more hype than reality.

The report, from the advocacy group Institute for Local Self-Reliance, found that Walmart's greenhouse gas emissions have continued to grow since 2005, while the percentage of power it draws from renewable sources lags far behind other major corporations.

"Walmart has a highly unsustainable business model, built on shipping goods long distances, selling mountains of very short-lived products, and big sprawling stores that entail lots of driving," said Stacy Mitchell, a senior researcher at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance and the report's author. "Walmart is unwilling to address any of these core parts of their business model, so you have a corporate sustainability campaign that is doing nothing about its overall impact."

Walmart [unveiled its sustainability initiative](#) to much fanfare in 2005, citing concerns about climate change. "This used to be controversial, but the science is in and it is overwhelming," then-CEO Lee Scott said at the time. "We believe every company has a responsibility to reduce greenhouse gases as quickly as it can."

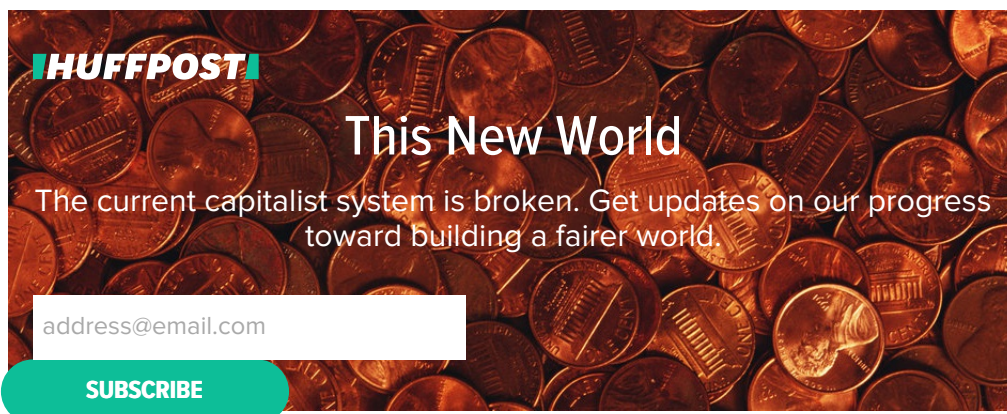
But Walmart's annual greenhouse gas emissions have climbed since then — from 18.9 million metric tons in 2005, to 21.5 million metric tons in 2011. The company's reported emissions dipped in 2012 by about 1.3 percent, but those figures were in line with the retail industry and were caused, at least in part, by [a mild winter](#). The emissions figures come from data that the company [reported to CDP](#) (formerly known as the Carbon Disclosure Project), a London-based nonprofit that works with corporations to reduce environmental impacts.

The report argues that Walmart's emissions are high enough for it to qualify as one of the biggest polluters in the U.S., with [more annual emissions than](#) corporations such as Shell Oil Company, Dow Chemical and CONSOL Energy. "When people think about climate change and they think about who the big corporate polluters are, they're not thinking of Walmart, and they should be," said Mitchell.

Chris Schraeder, Walmart's senior manager for sustainability communications, defended the company's work on reducing emissions in an email to The Huffington Post, declaring that the company has "shown that we can grow our business while slowing our environmental impact." He said that from 2005 to 2011, the total square footage of Walmart stores and facilities increased 40 percent and sales increased 44 percent, but its greenhouse gas emissions grew only 10 percent. Schraeder said the company anticipates that by 2020, "we'll not only flat-line [greenhouse gas] emissions, we'll start seeing a decline" — even as the number of stores continues to grow.

The report also notes that Walmart lags behind competitors when it comes to the greenhouse gas intensity of its operations — or the amount of pollution created per \$1 million in revenue. Walmart's CDP filing for 2012 lists a greenhouse gas intensity of 45.16 metric tons. Competitors like Target and Costco had much lower intensities — 41.9 metric tons and 16 metric tons, respectively.

Those figures don't incorporate the emissions that Walmart leaves out of its accounting in reports to the CDP. Those include emissions from shipping containers of merchandise from around the world, a [major source of planet-warming emissions](#). In 2012, Walmart was [the biggest importer in the U.S.](#), bringing in 720,000 cargo containers. Nor do the emissions figures account for clearing land and building new supercenters. The company built 1,316 new U.S. stores from 2005 to 2012. Walmart added another 229 stores in 2013 and plans to build up to 266 more next year, according to [a recent press release](#).



The report also argues that Walmart trails other major corporations when it comes to the percentage of power it draws from from renewable sources. Walmart [announced a goal earlier this year](#) of obtaining 100 percent of its energy from renewables. As of its [2012 Global Responsibility Report](#), the company was 4 percent of the way there. The company [boasts that it is the](#) "largest onsite green power generator in the US." But the report notes that in terms of the percentage of its electricity drawn from renewables, Walmart lags behind companies like Whole Foods, Kohl's and Staples, all of which produce more renewable energy than

