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By Tom Kenworthy

The Salt Lake City Winter Olympics will reach one of its main environmental goals today when a non-profit organization credits the Games with helping reduce emissions of greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

The Games will be certified as "climate cool" by the Climate Neutral Network, a group that helps companies and communities reduce their impact on Earth's climate.

Combined with an ambitious tree-planting program and a projected 90% recycling and composting rate for waste generated during the Games that begin Feb. 8, the Salt Lake Olympics will set a new standard for sensitive conservation practices, the Games' environmental coordinator says.

"Not only have we met our promises, but we've raised the bar from previous Games," says Diane Conrad Gleason of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee (SLOC).

However, some environmental activists suggest that while SLOC justifiably gets credit in some areas, it let slip the chance to set an exemplary standard.

"I'm having a hard time feeling good about what SLOC has accomplished," says Tom Price, who headed the organizing committee's environmental advisory panel. "It's not like they are going out and dumping oil in Great Salt Lake. They are doing some good things, but they are missing a lot of opportunities, and they are doing some really stupid things."

Among the shortcomings cited by Price and other critics is a transportation plan that depends heavily on private autos, with mass transit handling just 5% of spectators heading to mountain sports venues. The \$36 million being spent on temporary parking lots would have been better used on mass transit, Price says.

Local groups such as Save Our Canyons also chide the Games' organizers for doing less than they could have to reduce energy consumption by using a fleet of thousands of low-mileage SUVs. Huge illuminated Olympic rings erected in the foothills also will waste energy, environmentalists say.

But Exhibit A for environmental groups is a controversial land exchange under which the privately owned Snowbasin Ski Area -- site of the downhill and Super G skiing events -- received about 1,300 acres of U.S. Forest Service land for base improvements and housing. In return, the ski area gave the Forest Service almost 12,000 acres scattered

across four Utah counties. Federal law exempts the ski resort's expansion from environmental review.

"You're turning 1,300 acres of pristine land into condos and houses with streets and sewers and parking lots and with no environmental reviews at all," says Joro Walker, an attorney with the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies.

It is not SLOC's job to "second-guess what Congress does," responds Gleason, who says the results are environmentally "very sound."

Environmentalists give SLOC credit for taking their advice on the route for a new road to Snowbasin and for moving the cross-country and biathlon venue to protect a sensitive watershed. And the Olympics, they say, played a key role in getting a light-rail system built for Salt Lake City.

SLOC also was instrumental in persuading many of Salt Lake City's hotels to become more environmentally aware, says Debra Brandsrud, general manager of the Wyndham Hotel. As a result, several hotels have pooled their van shuttle services, changed to cold-water laundry systems for linens and begun recycling programs.

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Olympic planners promise cleaner air for 2002 Games

By ROBERT GEHRKE

WASHINGTON (AP) _ Despite a crush of airline and automobile traffic descending on the city, Salt Lake Olympic organizers say the air over the valley should be cleaner than in years past.

The Salt Lake Olympic Committee's commitment to a net reduction in the amount of pollution pumped into Utah skies was honored Thursday by the Climate Neutral Network, a clean-air interest group.

"(They) not only stepped up to the plate to fight global warming, they have also issued a leadership challenge," said Sue Hall of the Climate Neutral Network.

Diane Conrad Gleason, SLOC's director of environmental programs, said each host city has recognized there is a challenge to be more environmentally sensitive than the past.

"It's become almost a competition in itself," she said. The Salt Lake committee estimated that 330,000 tons of pollution would be produced by an array of sources, ranging from airplanes and buses to transport visitors and athletes to increased electrical use down to emissions from the Olympic torch itself.

The committee offset the expected pollution by making its operations more efficient and getting commitments from major companies such as DuPont, Kennecott and Waste Management Inc. to reduce pollution by about 500,000 tons.

Normally, the reductions would give the companies pollution credits, which they could sell to other companies, allowing them to produce more pollutants without violating clean-air standards. Instead, they donated them to the Olympic committee which will retire them.

While many of the pollution reductions will come across the country, Diane Conrad Gleason, SLOC's director of environmental programs, said enough of them are in the Salt Lake Valley to mean a net reduction in the area's pollution.

The clean-air efforts are significant because the high mountains that rim the Salt Lake Valley trap pollution, which can mean murky, hazy air in the valley during the winter. Some environmental advocates have criticized organizers for not using more clean-burning mass transit or taking other steps to improve efficiency.

``Clearly there is more that could be done," said Daniel Lashof, science director for the Natural Resources Defense Council's climate center. ``Certainly we'd like to see more done to reduce the use of private cars."

But he did praise SLOC's efforts, calling them a unique accomplishment.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., a supporter of the Climate Neutral Network's efforts, said the Salt Lake environmental efforts and the recognition of the work comes at an opportune time.

``If the Olympic committee can boast zero emissions ... then let's say we're going to challenge everybody else in the country to match those efforts," he said.

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On the Net:

2002 Winter Olympics: <http://www.saltlake2002.com>

Climate Neutral Network: <http://www.climateneutral.com>

The White House Bulletin

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IN THE WHITE HOUSE AND AROUND TOWN

Environmental Agency Applauds Efforts By Winter Olympics To Reduce Emissions.

The Climate Neutral Network had high praise for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, because of the International Olympic Committee and the Salt Lake Olympic Committee's adoption of emission reductions standards and partnerships with the Norm Thompson company and Bonneville Environmental Foundation to facilitate the program. The group certified the Olympics as having achieved a net-zero impact on global warming by cutting more than 60 percent of its emissions from fossil fuel use and using insulation, energy efficiency, and alternative fuel upgrades in schools.

At a press conference announcing the certification, Sen. Ron Wyden said, ""By earning the Climate Cool designation, these innovative groups are proving to the world that it's possible, practical and cost-efficient to fight climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. I applaud their efforts and hope their good example encourages other businesses and organizations to become climate neutral."

Greenwire

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OLYMPICS: ALTHOUGH ENVIRO-FRIENDLY, CRITICS SAY MORE COULD BE; DONE

The Salt Lake City Olympic Games has successfully reduced emissions of greenhouse gases, according to the Climate Neutral Network, which will certify the games as "climate cool" today.

The certification recognizes the Salt Lake Organizing Committee's (SLOC) ambitious tree-planting program and projected 90-percent recycling and composting rate for waste generated by the games.

"Not only have we met our promises, but we've raised the bar from previous Games," said SLOC member Diane Conrad Gleason.

Some environmentalists criticize SLOC for not doing more. "They are doing some good things, but they are missing a lot of opportunities, and they are doing some really stupid things," said Tom Price, head of the organizing committee's environmental advisory panel, about SLOC's programs.

Environmentalists are primarily concerned about a controversial land swap where the Snowbasin Ski Area received 1,300 acres of U.S. Forest Service land in exchange for 12,000 acres scattered across four Utah counties. No environmental review was conducted on the 1,300 acres. "You're turning 1,300 acres of pristine land into condos and houses with streets and sewers and parking lots with no environmental reviews at all," said Joro Walker, an attorney with the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies.

The transportation plan at the Games relies primarily on auto use, with mass transit carrying just 5 percent of the spectators to mountain sports venues. And the Games will use thousands of low-mileage SUVs instead of less energy consuming vehicles, sparking criticism from local environmentalists such as Save Our Canyons.

Environmentalists do credit SLOC with playing a key role in getting a light-rail system built for Salt Lake City (Tom Kenworthy, USA Today, Jan. 31). -- MV