



Renewable Energy Delusions: Getting A Real Grip On Alternatives

Mar. 15 2011 - 12:37 pm | 2,114 views | 0 recommendations | 4 [comments](#)
By LARRY BELL

The public continues to be deceived by gross misrepresentations of “scientific” climate facts and “renewable” alternative energy prospects perpetrated through extravagantly funded green washing campaigns. In reality, the sky isn’t falling, the oceans aren’t rising, polar bear populations aren’t in danger, and carbon dioxide isn’t a pollutant. Blatant science corruption revealed by the “Climategate” scandal, Earth’s long history of extreme temperature cycles predating possible human influences, recent climate fluctuations, broadly recognized uselessness of climate models as predictive devices, and [U.S. Senate testimony volunteered by more than 700 leading experts](#) from around the world debunk global warming alarmism.

Despite a lack of any real evidence that a climate crisis exists, green marketing campaigns continue to demonize fossil fuels and CO₂, their agent of doom. Empty propaganda served up by government mandate and subsidy-dependent promoters would also have us believe that environmentally “cleaner” and eternally “renewable” alternatives can deliver independence from mining, drilling and importing the evil stuff. Such claims are deceitful and delusional.

Consumers generally have no idea how expensive “green” power actually is because much of the cost is passed on through taxpayer subsidies and preferential treatment that drives conventional prices higher. Even with that invisible support, it still costs more than most utility customers are willing to pay voluntarily. When pollsters ask people if they would pay more for alternatives that are “better for the environment,” the results are usually overwhelmingly positive. Yet when they are asked to actually sign up and pay more the euphoria disappears.

Most fortunately, America is blessed with vast amounts of coal (providing about 45% of our electricity in 2009) and natural gas (about 23% of power). We also have huge land and offshore oil reserves vital for transportation fuel, including enormous amounts contained along with gas in oil shale deposits amounting to several hundred years of supply. In comparison, potential solar, wind and geothermal power-generation capacities are anemic, and hydropower, which many “environmentalists” love to hate, has practically no dam places to expand at all.

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Consider also that alternatives currently account for only about 10% of U.S. electrical power production (half of that from hydro). Wind power (about 2.4% of the total) offers the only prospect for any significant growth, and has a long way to go in replacing fossils, or nuclear (about 20%). On the basis of cost and capacity, solar power (about 0.01% of electricity), is an even much less likely contender for a significant market share. Geothermal expansion is also very economically and geographically restricted.

In reducing dependence on coal and natural gas for power and heating, and petroleum for transportation, biofuels have proved to be much less promising than advertised. Corn ethanol yields little more energy than is required to produce it, competes with food demand, and releases copious CO₂ emissions (if you really care). Much-touted cellulosic ethanol from plant waste remains a long way from commercial production reality.

The term “hydrogen economy” is an oxymoron because it requires much more energy to produce than it yields. Its primary commercial source is natural gas, which has more efficient and beneficial uses. Of course hydrogen can also be produced from water — assuming that cheap and abundant energy is available from another source to electrolyze the water and compress or liquefy the gas. Compressing it sufficiently for practical range automotive use is also a big problem.

And just how “green” are those alternatives? Over time, fossil and nuclear energy may look a lot less objectionable to many true environmentalists. Others are likely to remain more united in opposition to “brown” energy than support of any particular alternative, and no option is immune from eco-attacks.

Utility-scale concentrating solar power (CSP) systems that produce electricity using lenses or mirrors to focus radiation on thermal collectors or photovoltaic cells [draw criticism from environmental groups](#) for taking up too much desert land, thus displacing certain animal and reptile species. Those that use photovoltaic collectors are also challenged on environmental grounds because they are manufactured using highly toxic heavy metals, explosive gases and carcinogenic solvents that present end-of-life disposal hazards.

The best sites for wind power production are typically along mountain ridges and coastal areas, locations that are also prized for scenic views and over-flown by bird and bat species that become turbine blade casualties. Many residents in proposed wind farm locations including the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Adirondacks in northern New York, the Chesapeake off the Atlantic coast between Maryland and Virginia, the ridges of northern Appalachia, and Cape Cod in Massachusetts have filed successful protests. Some Texans don’t like them either. In 2007 owners of the famous King Ranch [lobbied the Texas Legislature](#) seeking permitting restrictions based on whether turbines interfere with the environment and the property rights of nearby landowners, cutting into revenues from hunting and other recreational tourism activities.

Hydropower dams are unpopular with conservationists because they disrupt river ecosystems, kill spawning fish populations, and release large amounts of methane from decaying vegetation along riverbeds. Pressure from environmentalists persuaded the Bush-Quayle administration to drop hydro incentives in the Energy Policy Act of 1992, and both the Sierra Club and Trout

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Unlimited criticized the Clinton-Gore administration that followed for including it as a global warming prevention strategy.

Geothermal energy seems too good to be true, and unfortunately for most parts of the U.S., it truly is. Economically feasible power production sites are principally located west of the Rocky Mountains, and only California, Hawaii, Nevada and Utah currently have operating plants. The majority of usable reservoirs are located in remote, scenic wilderness areas where construction of plants, access roads, power lines and other infrastructure is perceived as an unwelcome intrusion on nature. And according to a lawsuit filed against two proposed plants in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California, the [developments would introduce](#) “highly toxic acids” into geothermal wells ... turning the lands into “an ugly, noisy, stinking wasteland.

Although nuclear power hasn't been historically embraced as a politically correct alternative, many former opponents are beginning to have second thoughts. For example, [Greenpeace co-founder Patrick Moore](#) told the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Energy and Resources in April 2005, “Nuclear energy is the only non-greenhouse-gas-emitting power source that can effectively replace fossils while satisfying the world's increasing demand for energy.” Nuclear power (which emits only water vapor) also has demonstrated a remarkable safety history, particularly considering that most of our current 104 operating plants (yes — 104) are several decades old with comparably outdated technology.

The present U.S. nuclear policy is bewildering. On the one hand, the Obama administration recently announced plans to issue \$8 billion in loan guarantees to help finance two new plants in Georgia. Then, at nearly the same time, it cancelled plans to proceed with development of a national Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository after \$10 billion has already been spent on the project. This termination will hobble efforts to create the “new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants” proposed in the president's first State of the Union address. The Yucca facility is the only site that has been vetted for safety, and without a permanent nuclear waste storage solution, several states, including California, won't allow new plants to be built.

It is essential to our national energy future that the public be much better informed about advantages and disadvantages of all alternatives, and that government policies not be allowed to constantly interfere with free market principles. “Green energy” has become a meaningless term, where capacities and benefits have been grossly exaggerated, and sustainability ceases to exist without an endless supply of government-rigged special-interest financing. Unfortunately, those “free” power lunches, like others we have been warned about, aren't any bargain after all.