Not so bright lights

Craig Rucker – 15 August 2013

So-called "renewable energy" is not clean, renewable, reliable, affordable or sustainable.

"Renewable energy" is a sexy term used to drive public policies and spending The Obama Administration and like-minded Green zealots have said repeatedly that they are waging a "war on coal," intend to bankrupt coal-based power plants, and delay or block oil, natural gas and nuclear projects – while fast-tracking and subsidizing ethanol, wind and solar programs

Another apostle of the renewable energy, anti-hydrocarbon movement is Senator Harry Reid. The chief organizer of and keynote speaker at this week's falsely named National Clean Energy Summit in Las Vegas, Reid is a true believer in destroying conventional energy through subsidies, regulations and strong-arm tactics. He even wants to shut down every coal-fired power plant in Nevada.

Senator Reid may believe that compelling and subsidizing increased renewable energy use, while undermining and even outlawing conventional energy, is the way to economic growth and energy independence. In reality, this reckless scheme could easily cause the collapse of our energy grid, job creation, economy and living standards, just as it is already doing in Europe.

Unfortunately, Reid and his allies could get away with it, because "renewable" confers an almost Holy Grail status that ensures widespread political, media, public and corporate support (for a lot of wrong reasons). That lofty status, however, ignores two fundamental facts:

1) Wind, solar and bio-fuel energy are not renewable, eco-friendly, reliable, affordable or sustainable.

2) Renewable energy schemes can no longer be justified by claims that we are rapidly running out of fossil fuels or causing dangerous man-made global warming. Oil sands and hydraulic fracturing have obliterated the depletion myth, while climate change fears are belied by a 16-year hiatus from planetary warming, historic lows in hurricane and tornado activity, and the abject failure of CO2-focused climate computer models.

In other words, the craze for "renewables" is driven by religious zeal, not science or economics.

Capturing, converting and transmitting energy from any source requires an infrastructure – which involves construction, maintenance and eventual replacement, all of which require land disturbance, raw materials extraction and processing, energy and investment. There is no pure fountain from which to drink – only limited options, each with its own upsides and downsides.

To compare energy sources honestly and rationally for specific purposes (heating, lighting, transportation or manufacturing, for instance), we need to apply the same standards and analytical methods for each alternative. However, those who champion "renewables" have consistently misrepresented the human, environmental, capital, manufacturing and maintenance costs of providing reliable, affordable energy in sufficient quantities to power a modern economy and maintain desired living standards.

For example, the subsidies needed for wind and solar projects are many times higher per unit of energy actually produced than is the case for oil, natural gas, coal or nuclear power. And yet, even with those subsidies, electricity delivered by "renewable" sources is far more expensive than is power from conventional alternatives. That means families and businesses pay much higher bills for lighting, heating, air conditioning and machinery power, when renewable mandates are imposed – and higher costs for all consumer goods, since higher energy and manufacturing costs are passed along to consumers.

When we factor in the natural gas, coal or nuclear power plants needed as backup for intermittent, unreliable wind and solar facilities, supposedly environment friendly renewable options also require more land, raw materials, energy and money than alternative, conventional energy sources. Solar arrays also impact vast areas of wildlife habitat, while wind turbines slaughter millions of birds and bats annually – necessitating broad, long-term exemptions from endangered species and other environmental laws.

The high cost of taxpayer subsidies and consumer electricity rates also results in two to four jobs being lost in traditional industries for every wind and solar job created via government manipulation of the marketplace. Blue-collar, poor and middle class families feel the worst impacts from this enormous wealth transfer to lobbyists, pressure groups, bureaucrats, and "green energy" companies and investors.

These subsidies are not sustainable; nor are the birds and bats and wildlife habitat being sacrificed on the altar of politically correct energy. Even worse, President Obama's determination to slash hydrocarbon use by 80% – to stave off man-made global warming catastrophes that exist only in computer models, White House statements and Hollywood movies – will require a 25-fold increase in wind and solar electricity generation, resulting in the annihilation of numerous species in regions all across the Lower 48 States.

Renewable energy hucksters ignore all of this, as they seek more grants, tax credits, production mandates, feed-in tariffs, production tax credits, and guaranteed annual returns on investments. They seek to claim the high moral ground, by chanting "renewable" while ignoring the environmental, economic and human costs of capturing and delivering energy from their preferred sources.

A recent BBC News article notes that, while wind turbines are typically permitted for up to 25 years, developers anticipate upgrading or replacing them after as few as 10 years in many locations. Offshore life spans are even shorter. A new Scottish Natural Heritage report says, by 2034, the industry will need to recycle or dispose of some 225,000 metric tons of turbine rotor blade material per year. This means 225,000 metric tons of *new* rotor blades will have to be manufactured, using materials extracted from the Earth via mining, drilling and other processes that use energy and generate mountains of waste.

A 2009 article in *MacLife* magazine acknowledges that, while "solar-powered gadgets have become *de rigueur* in our attempts to shrink our carbon footprint", there is a rarely discussed "dark side" to solar energy. Many solar panels are made with cadmium, a highly toxic carcinogen, and when these panels are decommissioned after about 20 years there will be a huge accumulation of "e-waste". Manufacturing polysilicon (a key component in sun-capturing wafers) generates four tons of toxic silicon tetrachloride for every ton of product – and Chinese firms that produce the bulk of this material and rare earth metals for solar panels and wind turbines have been dumping their wastes on farmlands and wildlife habitats.

Electric cars are likewise "environment friendly" only in the minds of renewable zealots. They require multiple large batteries that typically last up to three years and cost about $8,000 apiece, not including disposal costs, Diane Bacher points out in eHow. Battery disposal involves putting their hazardous metal wastes in special landfills, and the mass production of electric car batteries will create large volumes of hazardous wastes, while placing as much demand on the power grid as traditional vehicle equipment manufacturing, Bacher notes. Increased use of electric vehicles would put enormous strain on power grids that rely increasingly on intermittent wind and solar energy and less on coal, natural gas and nuclear.

Meanwhile, Europe's obsession with climate change and fossil fuel eradication has caused it to spend $882 billion on wind and solar power since 2005. Over 800,000 Germans have had their electricity cut off, because they could not afford to pay their soaring electricity bills; millions of British families have been driven into fuel poverty; and millions remain jobless in a stagnant EU economy.

"Renewable energy" is a deliberate false labeling strategy, designed to curry favor with trendy urbanites who are ignorant about energy and economic reality. The real cost to U.S. economic growth, jobs and living standards from following the Green Brick Road to ecological paradise is equally beyond their ken.

This is energy policy by and for not-so-bright lights, who let their religious fervor for anything not hydrocarbon get in the way of common sense and fact-based analysis. Their policies will result in dim bulbs in our future light fixtures – and expensive, job-killing energy for other needs. We cannot afford to continue going down this suicidal path.

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