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THE HOT BLOG

Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Everything's Bigger in Texas [Drew Thornley]

I just couldn't pass up the chance to comment on this solar-power piece from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram's* enviro-blog, the fetching named Planet DFW:

Giant 30 mile by 30 mile solar plants in west Texas could power the entire state, according to a new report from the Environment Texas conservation group. According to the report, the solar power plants could generate 148,000 megawatts of electricity — or twice the state's current energy use.

"Solar thermal power is ready for primetime," said Luke Metzger, director of Environment Texas. "With support from policymakers, Texas could quickly get much of its energy from this abundant and clean domestic energy source at prices competitive with new nuclear or 'clean coal' power plants."

First of all, a 30-mile-by-30-mile solar plant? He's kidding, right? Take a look at a Texas map. He's proposing to cover *entire counties* with solar panels. Even though West Texas tends to be sparsely populated, there is still a lot of productive farm land from Lubbock through the Panhandle, plus lucrative mineral rights around Midland. Also, how will they get a hold of a 30-mile-by-30-mile swath of land? Is this all private, through land sales, or is this a public use and, thus, worthy of a public taking? If the latter, I would *love* to see that eminent domain proceeding. (And multiple times over? The article and press release did say plants, plural.) "A 15-foot strip at the boundary of your property? No. Your county."

And if solar power were truly "ready for primetime," there would be no need for massive renewable-energy mandates and subsidies. There would be no conjecture about the copious positives that might flow from solar farms. Investors would be pouring money into solar energy without a need for government support, and solar farms would be busy meeting energy needs. But that's not the reality.

However, Metzger warned that solar energy tax credits that make such projects more cost effective are set to expire at the end of the year. He said the cost of energy from solar thermal power plants could be competitive with the cost of new nuclear power plants.

Heaven forbid that a green-energy subsidy expire. That would mean renewable options would have to be economically viable.

And more from ET's press release re: the report:

The cost of energy from solar thermal power plants is estimated to be competitive in cost

with theoretical coal-fired power plants that capture and store their carbon dioxide emissions. . . .

“Estimated.” “Theoretical.” Carbon sequestration plants are theoretical because they will be massively expensive. Good to know that solar is competitive with a non-viable technology. And this is a selling point?

[W]ith leadership at the state and federal level and the right policies, that, putting 80 gigawatts, enough to power 25 million homes, of concentrated solar power in place by 2030 is within reach. This would have the potential to generate between 75,000 and 140,000 permanent jobs and cut global warming pollution from U.S. electric power plants by at least 6.6 percent by the year 2030.

First, “with leadership at the state and federal level and the right policies” is perfectly translated as “the only way we can even begin to do this is with government subsidies and incentives.” Secondly, “global warming pollution?” Carbon dioxide is pollution? You mean the stuff we exhale, the stuff that plants and trees live on? Filthy stuff, that.

Federal clean energy tax incentives are spurring investment, creating thousands of “green-collar” jobs, and helping reduce global warming pollution,” said Russel Smith, Executive Director of the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Association. “If Congress lets them expire, clean energy projects will be severely curtailed.”

No kidding. Following the three expirations of the federal production tax credit, wind-energy investment tanked, with virtually no new investment the year following each expiration. The exact same thing will happen to wind and solar projects if the production tax credit expires a fourth time, as it should. Investors want returns on their investments; if their source for returns expires, leaving them with an investment projects that do not pass cost-benefit muster, they’ ll pass on the projects. Unless and until this is not the case (i.e. when money will flow to projects sans subsidies), renewable-power-will-rescue-us-and-meet-all-of-our-energy-demands will remain pie in the sky.

05/20 04:00 PM

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