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Report: Wind energy has its limitations

Evelyn Ngugi

Daily Texan Staff

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As the state's population grows, increasing efforts are made to harness renewable energy.

Texas is projected to add 5.4 million people by 2020. However, utilizing wind energy, potentially the state's largest renewable energy source, is not so simple.

Drew Thornley, an analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, released a report Tuesday addressing major challenges Texas faces in using wind energy.

"Wind is free," Thornley said. "But wind energy is expensive."

Bill Peacock, director of the foundation's Center for Economic Freedom, said Texas leads the nation in implementing the most policy regarding renewable energy. But these policies are costing Texas billions of dollars, he said.

During the next 18 years, adding wind energy to the Electric Reliability Council of Texas' grid system will cost at least \$60 billion in subsidies, tax credits and management costs, all to be paid by customer rates and taxpayers, Thornley said.

"Wind energy should only be employed to the extent that it passes economic cost that has been mustered and to the extent that it is technologically feasible," Thornley said.

Thornley recommended legislation pursue a policy of energy neutrality; legislation should not heavily subsidize private wind developers as it currently does, he said.

Because wind is subject to interruption or can periodically stop, harnessing wind energy would be difficult because sometimes no energy would be produced, according to the report. And wind blows least in Texas when energy is needed most — in the summer, Thornley said.

As a result, wind-generating units must be backed up by other units that use conventional sources to generate electricity.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas plans accordingly by only relying on 8.7 percent of wind power's capacity during peak summer hours, according to the report.

Lapses in development also prevent the electricity wind generates from being stored in large quantities. If the technology were available, energy could be reserved for those peak summer hours, Thornley said.

Thornley said he is optimistic that such technology will develop in due time. Until then, he believes government should mandate certain amounts of wind energy be produced, when at times its storage is technologically impossible.

There are also limitations in wind energy's transmission, Thornley said. The electric grid is currently unable to support large-scale wind generation. Infrastructure to move energy from West Texas, where wind energy is likely to be harnessed, to metropolitan areas does not exist yet.



Emily Kinsolving; The Daily Texan

Drew Thornley, a natural resources and economic freedom policy analyst, discusses the high cost of wind energy Tuesday afternoon.

These limitations contribute to the state's low use of wind energy despite high production and maintenance costs. According to the report, wind-generated electricity accounted for less than 3 percent of total electricity produced in Texas in 2007.

The report concluded that wind energy, though important in Texas' energy mix, is relatively unreliable. Legislators should proceed with caution when funding and incorporating it into the energy portfolio, Thornley said.

"We look for the bang for your buck for your wind energy," Thornley said.

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