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# No Substitute For Fossil Fuels

Posted 12/22/2009 06:43 PM ET

**Energy:** Earlier this year, Congress approved a scheme to pour \$80 billion — on top of the tens of billions already spent — into renewables. A government report released last week indicates the money will be wasted.

Renewable energy is the shiny gem that everyone wants but no one can have. Not even a president. Campaigning last year in Lansing, Mich., President Barack Obama said that it was his goal for the U.S. to generate 10% of its electric power from renewable sources by 2012 and 25% by 2025. But he cannot, by the force of will or executive order, change the laws of physics and economics.

America has long relied on fossil fuels to power its economy. Oil, natural gas and coal provide about 84% of the nation's energy.

And for good reason. They are plentiful and typically easy to retrieve, and, consequently, cheap.

At the other end of the spectrum are renewable sources such as solar, wind, biomass and geothermal. They supply only about 4% of our energy, the remainder coming from hydro and nuclear power.

An axis of environmentalists and Democrats want to change this ratio, because, according to the usual complaint, we depend too heavily on the fossil fuels that emit carbon dioxide.

Trouble is, the market for renewables is poor. Few want to use the inefficient, unreliable and expensive sources. But that hasn't slowed the renewable energy campaign, which has succeeded in persuading the public that renewables are a sensible energy source and convincing Congress to fund supporters' daydreams.

The government can continue to "invest" in renewables, and the dreamers will keep using public money to find the magic formula. But little will change over the next 25 years.

The federal Energy Information Administration's Annual Energy Outlook says in 2035, demand for liquid fuels will increase by almost 10% over 2008 levels, natural gas by nearly 7% and coal by 12%.

While use of renewables will increase as well — by 81%, including hydropower — they will still be unable to unseat our dominant energy source. Fossil fuels' share of consumption will fall by only six percentage points, from 84% to 78% by 2035. Renewables will provide about 8%.

It's clear that renewables, which have benefited from government subsidies far in excess of what fossil fuels have received, can't compete in today's market and won't be faring much better a quarter century from now, according to the government's own reckoning.

It's just as clear that throwing taxpayers' dollars at renewables has produced little progress.

Spain provides perhaps the best lesson. The government there has spent \$43 billion on solar energy projects, yet solar provides less than 1% of the country's electric power. It was a bad investment.

Chasing the wind is just as ineffective. When Congress temporarily eliminated wind power credits in 1999, 2001 and 2003, the number of new turbine projects fell sharply. The Texas Public Policy Foundation says that providing a modest level of wind power in that state would cost taxpayers at least \$60 billion through 2025.

Biomass is also a poor substitute. It's both primitive — its sources are wood and trash — and an environmental nightmare, devouring in some cases as much as 10 times the land mass than needed to create a wind farm. And wind farms themselves are big land eaters.

Geothermal energy, considered "free" energy from the earth, is also a space eater that requires heavy capital investment, which is often hard to recoup. In California earlier this month, a geothermal project was abandoned, despite a \$6 million grant from the Energy Department and roughly \$30 million in venture capital.

Geothermal has, as well, some environmental drawbacks. The day before the California project was closed, Swiss government officials permanently shut down a geothermal project in Basel because, the New York Times reports, "of the damaging earthquakes it produced in 2006 and 2007."

Maybe some of these renewables will one day be cheap and reliable. Technological advances will help. But today they are neither cheap nor reliable, and, based on the government's report, won't be for another generation.

Until they can compete, the country has to rely on proven sources: fossil fuels and nuclear power. To force cutbacks on these so that renewables can get a bigger market share, and to continue to fund projects with public money, is foolish and irresponsible.

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Posted By: Lchambliss(30) on 12/28/2009 | 11:22 AM ET

If there was any real value in Green energy, it wouldn't need government props. R&D money would be poured in from the private side of the economy.

Posted By: Lchambliss(30) on 12/28/2009 | 11:16 AM ET

The Watermelons are going about this the wrong way, scientifically speaking. First they should pour the funding into turning lead into gold. As for China and Europe doing what cannot be done, are the Chinese concerned about greenhouse gasses? No. Europe (France in particular) uses a huge amount of nuclear power. The U.S. Watermelons are dead set against nuclear power. So it's not a fair comparison to say China/Europe does X, why don't we?

Posted By: sean\_kinney(10) on 12/27/2009 | 11:18 PM ET

Europe, China and Brazil are consistently doing with green tech what American industrialists and their pundits say cannot be done...of course they started 20 years ago.

Posted By: MightyColumbia(5) on 12/24/2009 | 11:42 AM ET

We currently face the prospect of electric power shortage and accelerated power cost increases. This will be caused by the pursuit of alternative electric resources while electric demand rapidly increases (specifically plug in electric commuter vehicles). New large scale electric power is a requirement for our future.

Posted By: cosmos110(100) on 12/24/2009 | 3:16 AM ET

I wonder why the Clinton's took in \$43 million in campaign contributions from 9 donors who are in Saudi Arabia in a ten year period? Of course a lot of our elected officials take heavy campaign contributions from them. Don't they?

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