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# Whose Clean Energy Standards?

Posted on February 7, 2011 at 9:51 pm by Michael Economides in General

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In an effort to show some semblance of an energy and environmental policy, the Obama administration has recently begun advocating clean energy standards (CES). Clearly no sane person would be in favor of "dirty" energy standards, but there are many problems with the impossible goal the administration has set out to reach. First among them: the administration itself cannot agree on what they mean by clean energy.

The remarks the president made in his State of the Union address to the nation last week are a case in point. Mr. Obama posed the challenge that "by 2035, 80 percent of America's electricity will come from clean energy sources". There is an easy part for this pledge. Oil, the "dirtiest" of all among his environmentalist friends already accounts for virtually nothing in electric power generation. The market saw to that over the past 20 years.

He then listed a slew of energy resources he believes will put our nation on the path to achieving this goal. Some of them were reliable fossil fuels (coal and natural gas), others were controversial energy sources (nuclear, wind), while another was a cost-prohibitive renewable fuel that is many years away, most likely never, from wide-spread application (solar).

Here's the problem. Will clean coal be clean enough for the environmental activists that support the administration? And will the laborious permitting process and Nimbyism associated with nuclear power dissipate? Or what about the unfounded backlash against domestic natural gas development and the resulting laws and regulations that are restricting its production?

It is obvious then that this general uncertainty about what the government deems to be a clean energy source makes it impossible to enact reasonable standards. And the slim likelihood that lawmakers will ever be able to outline with any certainty what is clean and what isn't presents a sizeable roadblock to companies' ability to invest and produce energy here in America.

A recent analysis by the non-profit publication ProPublica, demonstrates the lobbying malle over clean that is certain to undermine any attempts at long-term investment. Their "report" on natural gas skewed and combined various reports by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to make faulty assertions about the comparative environmental impact of natural gas versus coal – claiming some natural gas supplies were only marginally cleaner than their much dirtier energy cousin, coal. The EPA quickly refuted this claim, which has now been thoroughly debunked. The organization claims that its work "focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with 'moral force'", but adapting calculations in an ideological fashion demonstrates that the debate over how to define "clean" will be anything but objective and moral.

This debate and confusion over the cleanliness of energy sources is not just present within Washington's halls of power. Take for example the film *GasLand*, which documents the supposed-negative impacts of natural gas development – and specifically the drilling process known as hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") – on American communities. The film's creator traveled nationwide to chronicle what he deems the "trail of secrets, lies and contamination" being left by America's natural gas operators. If the President was serious about natural gas he would point out the ridiculousness of the arguments in *GasLand*.

Sadly, the film's baseless claims and wild exaggerations have garnered significant media attention, coaxed policymakers to pass laws and regulations detrimental to economic development and energy security and, here's the kicker, led to it being recently nominated for an Academy Award in the feature documentary category. Given the lack of facts within the film, perhaps a nomination in the comedy direction category would be a better fit.

America's energy future, however, is no laughing matter. And the jobs, investment and affordable energy offered by tapping our domestic energy resources will give our ailing economy a big boost. We are going to need a lot more energy in the future, and continuing to manipulate markets for energy and waffle about clean energy sources is hamstringing today our ability to prepare to meet these needs tomorrow.

Perhaps Christopher Guith, vice president for policy at the Institute for 21st Century Energy, said it best this past Tuesday when he stated, "It's ridiculously premature to even have a CES conversation". Indeed, until the Obama administration can find a way to objectively define "clean," our energy future would best be left to the force of the invisible hand.

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