

No spin -- windmills fail

Orange County Register, 8-27-10

Is wind power a viable alternative to low-cost fossil fuels? Consider this: relying on windmills to reduce greenhouse gas emissions not only is expensive and ironically harmful to the environment, it won't accomplish its main goal.

"A slew of recent studies show that wind-generated energy likely won't result in any reduction in carbon emissions – or that they'll be so small as to be almost meaningless," Robert Bryce, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, writes in a recent Wall Street Journal column.

Private-sector studies and the Department of Energy have found the intermittent nature of wind means utilities must either keep conventional power plants running to avoid outages, or "continually ramp up and down" conventional coal- or gas-fired generators, writes Mr. Bryce, author of "Power Hungry: The Myths of Green Energy and the Real Fuels of the Future." The inefficient "cycling" of generators made to run continuously creates more emissions than running constantly. Also, wind power largely displaces natural gas-fired generators rather than plants burning more carbon-intensive fuels, says Mr. Bryce.

Nevertheless, wind power costs a lot. The U.S. Energy Industry Administration says tax subsidies for wind power are 200 times greater than for oil and gas, based on per-unit-of-energy produced.

California law mandates utilities must produce a third of their power from wind and other so-called renewable sources by 2020. Today 1.8 percent is wind-produced, and less than 1 percent nationwide.

The futility of replacing low-cost, efficient fossil fuels with windmills was learned in Scotland, where wind farms delivered half their anticipated power this year. Officials blamed calm weather. More than 40 German top business managers recently complained that mandated renewable energy, including wind power, "will cause significant extra costs in the future," 8 billion euros this year alone.

In Nebraska, officials say wind power can't "sustain the state's energy needs" because, at best, windmills operate at 40 percent of maximum production level, compared with 90 percent for coal and 95 percent for nuclear power. In Boston, consumers were assured wind power wouldn't increase their rates, but then discovered power from 130 Nantucket Sound wind turbines costs 21 cents per kilowatt hour compared with 9 cents from conventional sources.

Don't forget the ecological price. Windmills' soaring heights obscure views and shred birds on massive scales, which can attract hordes of vermin feasting on the sliced and diced fowl. Wind turbines are so noisy that an Oregon wind-generation company offered residents \$5,000 each to sign a waiver promising not to complain.

In Great Britain, where more than half of wind farms are built in places where there isn't enough wind, according to the Daily Mail, the energy and climate change secretary estimates wind power will increase prices by one-third. Then there's the additional, substantial costs to transmit electricity from remote wind farms to populated areas.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that America's 84 percent reliance on fossil fuels as of 2008 will be reduced to 78 percent by 2035. It makes little sense to mandate huge additional costs, to impose a less-reliable, annoying energy alternative that ultimately won't even achieve its principle goal of reducing greenhouse gases.