

Why Trump's Cabinet Won't Derail Renewables' Growth

By [Matt Tomich](#)

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When he nominated Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt as EPA director, former Texas Governor Rick Perry as Energy Secretary and Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, many perceive Donald Trump put down his marker for fossil fuels and against renewables.

Yet in their confirmation hearings, they went out of their way to distance themselves from that notion. Tillerson was upbeat about the US stepping up on renewables. Pruitt said climate change was not a hoax and indicated general support for renewables. Perry disavowed his position in the 2012 election that the Department of Energy should be abolished, and cast doubt on reports the Trump administration intended to defund the DoE office of Renewable Energy and Efficiency.

So where does that leave us? Should we be bearish on the near term future of clean energy? Hardly. Of the many forces influencing it, national politics is not one of the stronger ones. The Trump administration may have little interest in decarbonization, but markets have a great deal of interest in it. Based on the signals it has sent so far, the administration seems to have little incentive or appetite for getting in the way.

Global renewables investment is enormous -- China alone invested \$100 billion last year. In many countries, solar and wind are reaching cost parity with fossil fuels. We're rapidly surging toward a multi-trillion-dollar global clean energy market -- the largest in history.

In the US, renewables generate more energy than in any other country except China. They are about 15% of our domestic energy mix and ramping up fast. Since 2008, US wind power tripled, while solar increased *30-fold*. Domestic demand for renewable energy is skyrocketing, and the number of tariff programs to deliver it to large corporate customers, such as Facebook's new data center in New Mexico, doubled in 2016.

Many US states and cities are reaffirming and progressing toward ambitious decarbonization goals. Half of US renewable generation investments in the last five years exceeded state requirements under Renewable Portfolio Standards. Those investments owe nothing to policy incentives, and yet cut carbon emissions by 100 million tons annually, or about 5% of the US electricity sector's total emissions.

Beyond solar and wind, new, promising renewable energy markets are emerging, such as renewable natural gas. RNG is nearly identical to geologic natural gas. It burns as cleanly, and can be transported in the same pipelines and burned in the same power plants, boilers and vehicles. But it's not a fossil fuel. It's made from biogas emitted by decomposing organic materials like farm waste, food waste and municipal wastewater, which are renewable, ubiquitous resources.

Capturing and refining that biogas turns what would otherwise be greenhouse gas pollution into clean energy for heat, electricity or transportation. As a transportation fuel, over its lifecycle RNG can be net carbon-*negative*, meaning it actually results in less atmospheric greenhouse gas than if the organic wastes were just left to rot and outgas. The more RNG we make and use to displace diesel and gasoline, the lower net emissions go.

Electrification can't currently deliver the energy density that 18-wheelers need, but RNG can. And while they are only 4% of all US vehicles, heavy-duty buses and trucks represent a quarter of domestic road fuel use and a quarter of transportation's greenhouse gases. Running them on RNG slashes those emissions deeply.

RNG already fuels UPS delivery vehicles, Santa Monica's entire Big Blue Bus fleet, and soon, it will power the world's largest natural gas vehicle fleet, LA County Metro. Last year, almost 20% of natural gas used in transportation was waste-derived RNG, including over 50% in California. Production is rising fast. Measured in terms of how much diesel or gasoline it displaces, domestic RNG production went from 20 million gallons in 2013 to nearly 150 million gallons last year.

That's remarkable growth, but it still isn't easy for emerging renewables like RNG to scale up in energy markets heavily dominated by fossil fuels. They can benefit enormously from market-based policy incentives like EPA's Renewable Fuel Standard, which includes tradable credits for RNG producers. It has helped drive the recent surge in RNG use as a transportation fuel, and new investment and job creation in the RNG sector.

Would the Trump administration end such incentives? It seems unlikely. When Ted Cruz called for the RFS to be repealed, candidate Trump defended it. Scott Pruitt in his confirmation hearing this week expressed general support for EPA's RFS program. That's a shift away from his statements as Oklahoma Attorney General, which were critical of the RFS. But as an Oklahoma legislator, he also supported alternative energy development, including biomass. For that matter, as Texas Governor, Rick Perry presided over a massive expansion of wind power. And as Exxon CEO, Rex Tillerson repeatedly supported introduction of a carbon tax.

While it's too early to tell what the new administration's renewables policy will be, we do know jobs are a top Trump priority. 2.5 million Americans and counting work in the renewables and energy efficiency sectors. Hundreds of thousands of non-exportable jobs in "red" states come from production of domestic, non-petroleum fuel. There are more US solar jobs than oil/gas/coal extraction jobs, and solar jobs are growing 12 times faster than overall job creation. Would Trump and colleagues decide to undermine that kind of growth for political reasons? There is no indication they would.

But whether they do or don't, as they'd say in Texas or Oklahoma, the horse is out of the barn. Progress on renewables is picking up speed and the market momentum behind them is strong. They still need policy incentives, and all the impetus clean energy advocates can give them. But they will continue to make progress -- and money -- regardless of who makes or executes energy policy in Washington.

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