



## **Change isn't a spectator sport: Renewable energy can happen without Washington**

**BY MATT TOMICH, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 03/29/17**

You don't have to invoke any new political divisions to explain President Trump's roll-back of Obama's Clean Power Plan or his reversal of Obama's decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. Feeding fossil fuels and starving clean energy is established orthodoxy; it comes straight out of the Reagan and Bush playbooks.

In fact, the only thing that's new and evolving about Trump's energy policy is the context. Climate change impacts are accelerating visibly; so is the growth of renewable energy. With or without the administration's help, energy policy must evolve to reflect this new reality.

Meanwhile, Trump's proposals are old energy policy. His budget plan would gut Obama's environmental and energy programs just as Reagan did Carter's. Reagan slashed renewables R&D 85 percent, rolled back fuel efficiency standards and killed the wind investment tax credit, effectively strangling renewables in their cradle.

Trump's "America First Energy Plan," released last month, is a reprise of the 2001 Bush/Cheney energy plan drafted by oil and gas insiders. Both emphasize increased fossil fuel production on federal lands while doubling down on the most polluting ones. Cheney paid lip service to tax credits for renewables, but dismissed them as "years down the road." Trump's plan omits the words "renewable energy" entirely.

Yet renewables are integral to America's energy mix, growing faster and creating more jobs than any other form of energy. New renewables installations outstrip new fossil fuel and nuclear capacity combined, more than two to one. Solar creates one of every 50 new American jobs — more than oil, gas and coal extraction combined. While nuclear, oil and coal are shrinking rapidly and natural gas is growing only slowly, renewables are surging. Solar grew twelvefold since 2011 — 17 times faster than the overall economy.

Like Reagan and Bush, Trump would favor fossil fuel production at renewables' expense. But the overwhelming majority of Americans, including 73 percent of Trump voters, want more renewables in the future. A bipartisan coalition of 20 U.S. governors is urging the White House to support wind and solar.

Renewables are coming of age and no longer stand or fall on government largesse. But federal incentives are still important to help level a chronically skewed playing field. Since the 1920s,

the fossil fuel industry received massive tax breaks, worth over \$10 billion last year.

Renewables incentive programs cost a tiny fraction of that and pay dividends in the form of non-exportable jobs and secure, home-grown, lower-cost energy. Examples include the 30 percent Investment Tax Credit for real estate owners who install solar, or EPA's Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) credits for producing renewable fuels. RFS significantly boosted renewable natural gas, a clean, virtually carbon-free fuel made from organic waste.

Would Trump end such incentives? Maybe not. The White House budget and energy plans don't mention them, but in a recent letter Trump reiterated support for the RFS, declaring "renewable fuels to be essential to America's energy strategy." Meanwhile, Defense Secretary James Mattis reaffirmed his position that climate change is a security threat and the military should cut dependence on foreign fuels and deploy renewables.

In any case, America's energy future hinges less on what Washington does than on what the rest of America does. Renewables' growth is driven mostly by demand and investment from states, cities, companies and consumers outside the Beltway. For example, some 30 city mayors are asking automakers to help them procure low-emission car and truck fleets, notwithstanding Trump's attack on fuel efficiency standards.

American households and local businesses are important drivers of renewable energy demand, and can also help boost supply. Even if they rent or otherwise can't install solar, wind or geothermal systems, they can separate their organic waste, which is a huge renewable energy resource, and ask their local government to collect and use it. Food and other organic wastes are feedstocks for renewable natural gas (RNG).

RNG is virtually identical to geologic natural gas, but has a fraction of the carbon footprint. In fact, when made from food waste and used as a transportation fuel, it's net carbon-negative, meaning it results in less greenhouse gas in the atmosphere than if it were never made or used. Switching heavy-duty vehicles from diesel and gasoline to RNG would cut U.S. greenhouse gases swiftly and deeply. Converted fleets would exceed international goals of 80 percent emission reductions, not by 2050, but overnight.

Some U.S. cities and states have organic waste separation and collection, but most still don't. Local residents and groups could change that, moving RNG forward whether federal incentives get cut or not.

Change is not a spectator sport. If Americans want renewable energy, we can make it happen, with or without Washington's help. Then we'll reap the rewards: low-cost fuel, non-exportable jobs, and emissions reductions that protect our climate and health. That would be an "Americans-First" energy plan.

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