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Lying in the Sun

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Lying in the Sun

APRIL 22, 2013 BY ANDY BRUNNER-BROWN 0 COMMENTS

National security threats are all around us. Anything can be a threat: poor education, environmental concerns, international or domestic terrorists, cyber security—the list goes on. Energy security will continue to be a problem until actual changes are made.

It will be a long time before America is no longer dependent on oil as a fuel source. Recent efforts in reducing consumption have helped, but that conversation has been going on for far too long, and there is too much infrastructure already built around oil. The Keystone pipeline is not an answer to energy needs, nor is drilling off the Alaskan shore.

The United States might be able transition away from gasoline engines with natural gas engines, even if this means a transition period dependent on fracking. Natural gas is arguably the transitional fuel to the future. But even natural gas just delays the inevitable: natural gas provides a new infrastructure that requires constant exploration and a reduction of limited resources.

If the United States wants to develop long-term energy security, the United States must stop relying on limited resources, whether foreign or domestic, and instead develop a new infrastructure.

Solar energy provides a solution for energy security.

As a renewable energy, solar energy does not use limited resources. Utilizing solar energy also reduces the greenhouse gas emissions that create climate change, which, in the words of former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in his analysis of the draft National Climate Assessment, “isn’t a distant threat.”

Rooftop solar panels can create a strong distributed generation infrastructure:

Conventionally, power plants have been large, centralized units. A new trend is developing toward distributed energy generation, which means that energy conversion units are situated close to energy consumers, and large units are substituted by smaller ones. A distributed energy system is an efficient, reliable and environmentally friendly alternative to the traditional energy system. ... [A] distributed energy system is a good option with respect to sustainable development.

On the other hand, utility-scale solar panel fields damage the environment.

Incentives for rooftop solar panels already exist, such as rebates and tax credits to provide the short-term incentive to install solar panels at a reduced cost. Increased home values and net energy metering provide long-term incentives.

Incentive programs cost tax dollars; however, the legislature should be able to justify these programs because the upcoming costs of climate change are going to be enormous. Therefore, cost benefit analysis for funding such programs should find positive returns: it costs less money now to prevent greater damage later.

Headlines demonstrate how well the incentive programs are doing to promote solar energy:

- California to be home to largest concentrated solar energy system in the world.
- California has long been a bastion for solar energy in the U.S.
- Nine recommendations to continue California’s local clean energy boom
- The Sierra Club welcomed news Tuesday that California crossed the benchmark of 1,500 megawatts of installed solar power.

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These headlines demonstrate California’s efforts in pursuing the legislative goals of established in the Global Warming Solutions Act, which “which set the 2020 greenhouse gas emissions reduction goal into law.”

These headlines basically lie. The headlines distort reality and create the perception that solar panels are already everywhere when, in reality, California has very limited solar capacity. In fact, the United States as a whole is not producing nearly enough energy from the sun.

Truthful but misleading statements create complacency. In a democracy, where public opinion on a matter is important, perhaps this complacency impedes legislative incentives to truly make solar panels ubiquitous. Legislative incentives for soaring energy are important because the energy market in the United States is not a free market. In fact, oil and coal are heavily subsidized.

California has a solar capacity of approximately 1.5 gigawatts already installed; the United States as a whole has capacity of 7.2 gigawatts. In comparison, Germany has a solar capacity of approximately 30 gigawatts, yet receives “Alaska levels of sun.” Despite the “boom” in California’s clean energy, California has much to aspire to in terms of Germany’s solar power production.

In fact, Germany installed 7.6 gigawatts of solar capacity—more than the United States has total—just in 2012. Italy has more than double the solar capacity of the entire United States. Spain, with less than one-sixth the population of the United States, has a solar capacity of over 10 gigawatts.

The disparity in the solar capacities of California and Germany largely results from the numerous and complex differences in policies and markets. For instance, Germany has feed-in tariffs and subsidies. American and Californian policies, on the other hand, make the short-term cost savings of traditional energy outweigh the long-term benefits of solar panels.

California currently has programs that incentivize solar panels, such as the California Solar Initiative. With a target of not even 2 gigawatts of solar capacity by 2016, the California Solar Initiative is a feel-good-but-do-little program. For perspective, Germany’s 30 gigawatts of capacity provide only 3-10% of Germany’s energy needs.

Programs like California’s do help increase solar capacity, yet these programs perpetuate the misperception that California is an environmental leader. It is not.

The truth is, the United States is ranked fifth in the world in solar power capacity. Not only do each of the four countries with more solar capacity than the United States have fewer citizens, all four countries combined together have fewer citizens.

Simply put: more needs to be done.

Not all policies must be incentives for individuals or companies to act. Some policies could require solar investment, similar to what Lancaster, CA now requires: “almost all new homes either come equipped with solar panels or be in subdivisions that produce one kilowatt of solar energy per house.” Additionally, requiring more efficient buildings will reduce the total power needed.

The public must know that the United States is not number one in solar. Then, through legislating incentives and requirements to increase solar capacity, California and the United States can increase energy security while also helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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