

The Washington Times

GUNDERSON: Some basic facts about wind energy

It doesn't work

By Bill Gunderson

Saturday, March 16, 2013

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If only wind energy worked, it would be great. But it does not -- at least not that well. What's worse, most people do not know, especially the Green Energy True Believers. Those who do know, however, do not care.

They tell us wind is an ideal way to solve "global disruption" -- which is what they are calling global warming this week. The only thing standing in the way of wind energy, they say, is the ignorance of the fossil-fuel crowd.

Let's put aside for a moment all the talk about global warming: Whether it exists. Whether it is man-made. Whether wind turbines will slow it down.

Let's even forget for a moment that the plunging price of natural gas and its increasing popularity as a substitute for coal has reduced carbon emissions to their lowest level in 20 years. It is threatening to make wind power even more financially obsolete.

When you set these facts aside, here is what remains: Wind turbines do not last as long as promised. They do not produce as much energy as hoped. Moreover, they require more maintenance than anyone imagined.

Wind energy turns out to be a lot like solar energy.

The Daily Mail recently reported that the University of Edinburgh found "for onshore wind, the monthly 'load factor' of turbines -- a measure of how much electricity they generate as a percentage of how much they could produce if on at full power all the time - dropped from a high of 24 per cent in the first year after construction, to just 11 per cent after 15 years."

That's a 55 percent drop, for you dinosaurs who still think that is important -- and that is just for turbines still working.

There's a reason why so many wind projects got so much attention on the drawing board, but when it comes time to build them, they wither away. The offshore wind project in Delaware is a good example: One day it was hailed as the secret to the universe. The next day, it was gone. It disappeared down a black hole when people who actually had to pay for it and build it figured out what it actually was going to cost them.

It was the real numbers that scared them off. In America, these numbers are harder to come by -- another red flag for investors -- but as many as 1 in 4 wind turbines just does not work. Some do not even spin. Others spin, but do not generate electricity, so it is hard to tell by looking at them.

Hawaii provides the favorite example: The 37 turbines at the Kamaoa Wind Farm stood derelict for more than six years after it was discovered that repairs were more expensive than replacements. This is just one of six abandoned wind farms in one of the most wind-ideal places on the planet.

The Altamont Pass Wind Farm in Northern California used to be the largest wind farm on Earth. Now it is best known as the largest killer of eagles and other raptors. The turbines are shut down for four months a year to protect the birds during their migration. So much for that pro-forma.

As many as 4,500 wind turbines have been built -- and abandoned -- in California alone.

How long can that last? Ask that question of a True Believer at your own peril. They say making money is no longer the point of being in business; saving the planet is.

Even Al Gore is getting out of alternative energy such as wind. Just check the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filings for his company, Generation Investment. Not a wind play in the portfolio.

There may be one million reasons to invest in wind, or to install a windmill. Most involve bragging to your friends that you are saving the planet. But if you need the energy or the money, don't -- because right now, wind is still nothing more than a faith-based initiative.

Just ask Al.

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