

Opposition to Windpower Pollutes Climate Policy

by Michael Vickerman

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Almost two decades have elapsed since Dr. James Hansen, a scientist with NASA Goddard Space Institute, injected global climate change into the political bloodstream. “It’s time to stop waffling,” Hansen told a Congressional panel. “The greenhouse effect is here.”

Yet the United States is no closer to adopting an overarching policy to curb greenhouse gas emissions than it was in the summer of 1988. Much of this inaction can be attributed to the successful disinformation campaign underwritten by fossil energy interests like Exxon Mobil and the Western Fuels Association.

Aiding and abetting this campaign was a handful of contrarian scientists who publicly challenged the existence of a scientific consensus on global climate change. Because these so-called “climate skeptics” possessed scientific credentials, reporters and commentators gave them equal time without performing any due diligence to ferret out the political agenda that lurked behind their public statements. Given nearly unlimited access to the media, climate skeptics successfully sowed doubt and confusion in the minds of decision-makers and ordinary citizens about the severity of the problem and the urgency for action.

While the climate change denial effort has lost steam in recent years, the disinformation tactics used in that campaign haven’t gone away. Instead, they are being retooled and redeployed to challenge the most visible manifestation of carbon reduction policies: windpower installations.

Wind generating capacity is increasing dramatically as more states adopt requirements on utilities to increase their supplies of renewable energy. But not everyone is welcoming this change, and those who don’t want to live near wind turbines are fighting back. In recent years, an Internet-based disinformation campaign has sprung up to both oppose individual wind projects and challenge windpower’s effectiveness in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

An example of this lamentable trend is the Industrial Wind Action Group (www.windaction.org), which serves as a bulletin board for antiwind commentary and articles highlighting grass-roots resistance to specific windpower proposals. Among the myths this web site and others like it propagate is the contention that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, zero-emission energy sources like wind actually create more carbon dioxide when their impact on the electric grid is taken into account.

The argument goes like this: the wind doesn’t blow all the time, therefore utilities have to build new coal and gas plants to provide back-up power whenever demand for electricity is high and the turbines aren’t spinning.

This is pure mendacity, but it's also easily disprovable mendacity. As anyone who works at a utility can testify, today's wind projects do not require dedicated back-up power sources. That's because utilities are required for reliability purposes to have enough capacity in reserve to accommodate record-breaking levels of demand, even when large power stations are off-line. And in Wisconsin, the reserve margin today is 18% above the highest peak ever recorded.

That margin is more than sufficient to accommodate all the wind generation that will be built to satisfy Wisconsin's renewable energy requirements through 2015. Put another way, there is enough reserve capacity to back up We Energies' 88-turbine project in Fond du Lac County and 11 others of similar size without any effect on system reliability.

According to another oft-repeated Internet myth, wind turbines do not reduce greenhouse gas emissions even when they are producing at full power. This preposterous assertion assumes that grid operators have no control over their generating units, and are unable to redispatch their plants to respond to fluctuating output from wind turbines. In reality, whenever wind is available to displace a fossil generator, a grid operator will shut it down. To do otherwise would add unnecessary costs to the electric system.

Outfits like the Industrial Wind Action Group don't care if their arguments can't stand up to scrutiny from energy professionals. That's because they understand that very few people in state legislatures, county boards, and media outlets know how an electric utility systems works. Lacking the specialized knowledge that would help them filter out fantasy from facts, these decision-makers and opinion-shapers tend to deal with their confusion by giving wind opponents equal time. And when they do, they give the antiwind groups a platform that allows them to pollute with impunity the public discourse on clean, renewable energy.

As Dr. Hansen went on to discover, successful disinformation campaigns are the price we pay for living in a country with a low energy IQ.

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