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A7 Story - *Wednesday - August 25, 2004*

## Renewable energy will pay dividends, on the farm and off

By Randy Smith

Recently, an editorial by Tracy Warner bemoaning the high price of renewable energy and the subsidies it receives appeared on this page. As an electricity consumer, a farmer, and a lifelong resident of Eastern Washington, I must disagree with Mr. Warner's conclusions. The facts reveal renewable energy to be a net positive for our state, and our nation, both today and in the future.

Renewable energy is cost-competitive. The cost of wind energy has decreased over 80 percent in the last 20 years, and it continues to decline. The Northwest enjoys relatively cheap power thanks to our remarkable hydroelectric system. In many areas of the country, however, wind power is cost-competitive with fossil fuel sources, as are other renewable technologies, particularly biomass.

All energy technologies have benefited from a myriad of government incentives. Over the past 60 years the nuclear industry has received \$145.5 billion, solar \$4.4 billion, and wind \$1.3 billion in federal subsidies. This trend is not merely historical -- the Energy Bill of 2001 developed by the U.S. House of Representatives included over \$33 billion in taxpayer-financed subsidies, over 75 percent of which were directed toward fossil fuel and nuclear energy.

Renewables save consumers money. The U.S. Energy Information Agency has found that increasing renewables to 10 percent of our national portfolio by the year 2020 would cause at most a miniscule increase in consumer electricity prices compared with business as usual. The EIA also predicts, however, that overall consumer energy bills would decrease because this action would reduce natural gas prices, more than offsetting the small increases in electricity costs. Even using conservative assumptions of \$3 to \$4 per million Btu for natural gas (today's costs are nearer \$6 per million Btu), total consumer savings could total \$13.2 billion between 2002 and 2020.

Investing in renewable energy creates jobs for Americans. This spring, researchers from the University of California at Berkeley concluded that "across a broad range of scenarios, the renewable energy sector generates more jobs than the fossil fuel-based energy sector per unit of energy delivered." These jobs in the renewable energy industry needn't be created in places like Denmark and Germany, current wind equipment market leaders. Instead, urges the National Renewable Energy Lab, "As one of the world's leading manufacturers of renewable energy systems, we can bring in more money with the increased use of renewable energy sources around the world. ... The United States manufactures about two-thirds of the world's photovoltaic systems ... (and) exports about 70 percent of these ... resulting in annual sales of more than \$300 million."

Economic benefits from renewables are concentrated in rural, agricultural areas.

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Tracy seems displeased that "(wind turbines) would be located in places where there is much wind and few people ... in windy, relatively poor places." I agree that renewable energy development will occur mainly in rural America, but to me, this is a glass half full. Renewable energy development is an economic boon for the local areas in which projects are built and where renewable fuels are abundant. The Department of Energy estimates that tripling our nation's use of biomass energy could create as much as \$20 billion in new revenues for farmers and rural communities. In our state, farmers leasing land to wind energy developers are typically paid \$2,000 or more annually per turbine, each of which takes up only around a quarter acre of land. Few other legal crops come close to matching the profitability of wind power for Washington's farmers and ranchers. It's time we started reaping these benefits as our counterparts in the Midwest and Texas have for years.

Renewables help stabilize electricity supply and hedge against supply disruptions. Just as your banker will advise you to diversify your investments, it makes good sense not to put all our eggs in one basket when it comes to our energy supply. A dry winter brings a summer of tough decisions: Will scarce water be used to irrigate fields, flush fish downriver, or produce hydropower? Adding other sources to our energy supply means less pressure on the hydro system, and less reliance on fossil fuel markets over which we have little to no control.

Energy independence means increased security. In 2001, the United States spent about \$103 billion to import oil. The more we rely on homegrown resources for both electricity and transportation (e.g. biofuels), the less vulnerable our nation will be to fluctuating global fuel markets and political instability in oil-producing regions.

As a lifelong citizen of this special part of the world, I take pride in our agricultural heritage, our unique scenic landscape, and our strong tradition of self-sufficiency. No one would be more dismayed than I at an ill-considered scheme to exploit our community's environment, economy or viewshed. But as a farmer, I know that we must look to innovation and stewardship to keep our land and communities vital. It's time to embrace renewable energy as a new source of regional pride, as an investment in the economic future of our community and in a bright future for our children.

Randy Smith, Cashmere, is director of rural affairs for Northwest SEED (Sustainable Energy for Economic Development).

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