

Dawning of a New Age: Experts Discuss Sustainable Energy

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Editor's Note: Experts from various sectors say we may be transitioning from an oil age to a new age of clean and sustainable energy – if only we could agree on how to get there. Mary Ambrose is the managing editor for New America Media.

PALO ALTO – Though experts agree that reducing the greenhouse gas emissions is “easily possible,” many do not agree on how best to ensure a renewable energy supply.

“Conservation isn’t the point,” PG&E’s Jonathan Livingston said at a recent Energy Crossroads Conference held at Stanford University. “Pushing efficiency through technology is the only way to make our lifestyles align with our supply.” Greatly increased fuel efficiency in cars is a perfect example, he told the group of scientists, business people, writers and government regulators.

“That’s fine,” responded Ira Ehrenpreis, a venture capitalist with the Palo Alto firm Technology Partners, “but in order to create and deliver those technologies on any kind of scale, you have to have legislation in place.” This would ensure that technology is standardized, he explained, “so that you know there will be stability in the marketplace.”

Jeff Byron, the new head of the Californian Energy Commission, says that can’t happen immediately. Byron points out that of the 200 bills on energy submitted to the Schwarzenegger administration, only a fraction will become law.

Chris Flavin, president of the environmental research organization World Watch Institute, thinks we have to decide now.

“We are at the start of a new age, one similar to the beginning of the oil age a hundred years ago,” says Flavin. “We have one shot to redesign the energy system in the 21st century.”

Renewable energy businesses are growing at about 20 percent a year, according to Flavin, the same increase as the rate of cell phone sales. The political arena’s regulations and incentives will decide which renewable energy source will win out, he says. “Rest assured, in only five years the world energy economy will differ radically,” he adds. The lines to buy Prius hybrid cars are long.

Venture capitalists invested only one percent of the hundred million dollars available into renewable energy in 2000, according to Ehrenpreis. By 2006, available funding had risen to 14 percent.

“There’s no question that business is desperately trying to find their way into this market,” says Ehrenpreis. But he agrees with Flavin that the ultimate direction for securing renewable energy lies with the government. “The next president cannot without a energy policy”, he warns. “Only when there is a long-term policy guaranteeing some predictability will business create the necessary infrastructure.”

Some point to coal as the tried and true domestic energy source, which produces nearly half of the energy in the United States. But Jeff Goodell, author of “Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America’s Energy Future,” says trying to use coal to fill our growing energy needs is “simply foolhardy.” Coal leads to more greenhouse gas emissions and is very expensive to deliver. “The idea that coal can be used cleanly is a dangerous fantasy,” says Goodell.

The coal industry is worried. A decision last week by the Texas utility company TXU sent a shiver down

their collective spine. TXU scrapped eight of its 11 planned coal-fired plants in order to gain support for its leveraged buyout. This was the result of strong lobbying by environmentalists who have been effective in challenging proposals in the courts to build new coal plants. Only four U.S. plants have been put into operation since 2000, even though in the previous 20 years, 155 were built.

Coal, Goodell says, is “a huge carbon anchor making the transition to a new energy future much slower.” Environmentalists now worry that China’s economic boom could be fuelled by coal, but Goodell says China is watching the United States. “They don’t want to turn into Pennsylvania and burn everything in sight,” he says.

Nobel prize winner Burton Richter echoes many environmentalists in his staunch belief in nuclear power. One of his most persuasive arguments is that nuclear power emits no greenhouse gases and can be ready for massive use very quickly, even though the United States stopped building plants 25 years ago after the accident at Three Mile Island.

Richter’s statistics effectively dismiss the fear of radiation poisoning for those who live near such a plant. He says the effect is equal to that of a coal plant and is less than radiation that occurs naturally in many places. Nuclear power already meets 80 percent of the energy needs of France, Sweden and Japan among other countries, Richter adds. These countries have no problem with where to store the plants; they “simply requires a strong regulatory regime independent of business,” he says.

As for consumers who are desperate to go green, David Gottfried, founder of U.S. Green Building Council, says before refitting all property with large scale solar panels, we should be pressuring companies to build better appliances, demand “response” air conditioners (rather than ones which run continually), revamped computer servers and better furnaces that heat the floor and not the ceiling.

Gottfried seemed to sum up a common attitude towards energy conservation when he pointed out that when we put marble or expensive wood in our homes we do it for its own sake. But, he said, “when it’s good for us” and the earth, we expect an incentive like saving money. “I just don’t get it,” he admitted, shaking his head.

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