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Trip Van Noppen

Solar Energy Foes Try to 'Block' Sun



Cartoon-style confrontation in Hawaii is no laughing matter



Photo credit: The Simpsons, "Who Shot Mr. Burns?"

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In a popular *Simpsons* [episode](#), the diabolical Mr. Burns builds [a giant disc to eclipse the sun](#) and force Springfield's residents into round-the-clock reliance on electricity from his power plant. It's pitch-perfect cartoon sarcasm, but with a foot firmly in reality: the fledgling U.S. solar industry faces an array of Burnsian obstacles to its growth across the country.

In Hawaii, for example, [Earthjustice is taking on a blatant effort](#) by the state's largest utility to block homes and businesses from installing rooftop solar panels, a move that could strangle Hawaii's burgeoning homegrown solar industry, prevent residents and businesses from saving money, and keep the state addicted to imported oil.

If there is anywhere that should be blazing the trail to a clean energy future, it is Hawaii. The islands are blessed with abundant sun, winds, and waves, yet today rely on imported fossil fuels for more than 96 percent of their energy. Hawaii consumers pay [the highest electric rates in the nation](#). The state is trying to chart a new course, but the utility is resisting change and fighting to limit solar access to the local grid.

In so doing, the Hawaiian Electric Company (HECO) is holding back much more than just Hawaii. It is hindering an important experiment with solar energy that could provide valuable information to consumers, entrepreneurs, utility owners and policymakers throughout the United States.

Although we certainly need to cut fossil fuel use by promoting solar and other renewable sources of energy, it isn't yet clear which policies are best for encouraging their economy-wide growth. In all likelihood, it will be a combination of approaches. Experimentation is critical to find out which ones will work, and lessons learned in Hawaii could answer some key questions for the rest of the country.

HECO's obstruction is indicative of the myriad challenges the U.S. solar industry faces, especially in places like Hawaii where solar is an absolute no-brainer. A program Hawaii is considering, called a feed-in-tariff, could provide a breakthrough.

Here's how it works. Suppose I install solar panels on the roof of my house that generate more electricity than I need to power my home. Under a feed-in-tariff policy, I can get paid handsomely by the local utility for feeding that excess electricity back into the grid for other consumers to use. This helps to defray the cost of my investment in rooftop solar panels.

A year ago, Gainesville, FL became [the first U.S. city to implement a feed-in-tariff for rooftop solar](#), and now other cities and states, including Hawaii, are hoping to follow in its footsteps. In Gainesville, the policy was unanimously approved by city leaders, who control the local utility. The Gainesville program reached its enlistment quota in just a few days.

But such popularity isn't universal. For-profit utilities, for example, are far less inclined than municipal utilities to back a feed-in-tariff for rooftop solar because it could decrease their earnings or reduce their control over customers' energy consumption. And indeed, in HECO's case, the utility is [doing what it can to limit the program's adoption](#).

America can't afford such limits as we move towards clean, domestically produced energy. In this rapidly changing energy landscape, where a boost in renewable power is an essential goal, old ways of doing business must change.

Many advocate a transformation in which the profits of investor-owned utilities are no longer linked to how much power the utilities sell, but instead with how effectively they serve their customers. Such a switch actually encourages a range of beneficial programs like feed-in-tariffs and [energy efficiency](#).

Encouragement from states and the federal government is critical for overcoming technological and regulatory barriers to the rapid spread of solar power. Government can spur innovation by investing in research to find new ways to harness renewable energy and deliver it affordably to customers on increasingly large scales. After all, for every Mr. Burns-style roadblock (or sunblock)

out there, scores of creative and committed innovators are finding ways forward.

There is no silver bullet that will solve our national (and global) energy problems. The path forward demands flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to try everything clean and renewable under the sun.

Comments

Submitted by Mark Modine (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:58am.

Colorado passed a law a number of years ago requiring the investor-owned utilities in our state to get 10% of their power from renewable sources. The utilities quickly learned it was cheaper to subsidize the installation of equipment on private homes and businesses. A new law in the works will raise the amount to 30%. The first grid tie rules in Colorado were meter neutral; your meter would go backwards but the utility didn't have to pay you for excess production. That has also changed and you are now paid for excess production slightly less than you buy from the power company; it is their infrastructure. Last year the republicans were refusing to extend the federal renewable energy credit unless the Democrats extended off-shore drilling. The credit allowed a 30% tax credit up to a maximum of \$2,000.00. Off-shore drilling was extended but the lying right wing reneged. One of the "pork" items added to the bank bail-out bill extended the credit and effectively removed the limit on the tax credit. Take charge of your state and the greedies.

Submitted by Michael Grish (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:56am.

Utility companies were established and would not exist without generous taxpayer funding, tax breaks, and subsidies, not to mention "market" rates from consumers, but now when America needs utilities to help transition to a clean energy future, utilities use their income to thwart the change, instead of using it to accelerate our renewable energy development. We end up giving these energy utilities corporate welfare, and reading posts such as that by Honest Broker. We don't have to do anything for the utilities, and honesty has nothing to do with their tactics to thwart renewable development. Structurally they are a business like any other, and when conditions change, some businesses are no longer needed. I'd say global climate change is an important changing condition. If they cannot voluntarily contribute to the solution using their access to investment capital, they must be forced to change or be eliminated, whether that be a government takeover of the utility to convert it to clean energy, or a restructuring mandate with government investment, similar to when banks are restructured, happens all the time. This is the way it has always been, the government is the ONLY vehicle capable of preventing tyrannical rule by dominant businesses like utilities. CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE OR GET OUT OF THE WAY. Finally, thank you Earthjustice for all your effort!

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:51am.

Greed and ignorance - the story of mankind through the ages. At one time the world was thought to be flat and it was heresy to think otherwise. Only when the power companies wake up and realize how much money they too will make by promoting alternatives will government seriously help push the causes of clean energy. In the meantime, everyone has to speak to their governors, legislators and President so that the voters' voices are more powerful than those counting on the quick buck and status quo.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:09am.

I'm so sick of hearing how all of these big name coal/oil companies can pay their way into our lives STILL, when the need for alternative energy is here AND the next big money making industry. Why cant these huge profit making companies get their heads out of thier wallets and see the sun as gold, also??

Submitted by Bryan (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:00am.

"Under a feed-in-tariff policy, I can get paid handsomely by the local utility for feeding that excess electricity back into the grid for other consumers to use." Following on HB's comment, the attitude expressed in this sentence bothers me. The handsome payments will come from other ratepayers, who will subsidize the homeowner's installation. Solar proponents should try an approach that acknowledges the economics of the power industry and the issues of grid stability. And I wrote this as a supporter of Earthjustice.

Submitted by Goose Duck Stevens (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 7:00am.

This is exactly what should be happening. Any company or person that adds energy to the grid should be paid for the sale of that energy. The utilities are getting paid for adding energy to the grid so why shouldn't a homeowner? Or do you think that the extra energy should somehow be discarded/wasted or given to the utility for free so they can make a profit on it?

This is clean energy, unlike the energy added to the grid by most utilities produce. Don't think of it as a subsidy (bad choice of words), but a commodity that people (like you) are willing to pay handsomely for.

Submitted by [John Mayer](#) (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:53am.

"The handsome payments will come from other ratepayers, who will subsidize the homeowner's installation. Solar proponents should try an approach that acknowledges the economics of the power industry and the issues of grid stability." So you'd prefer that money go to wealthy Saudi oil sheiks and Appalachian coal barons engaged in mountaintop removal instead of other members of the community? It's a funny sort of Earthjustice you believe in.

Submitted by [Bill](#) (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 6:26am.

In Germany and other European the payback from the Utilities is higher than the Utilities rate. Which is why Europe is about 10 years ahead of us. There is a much higher cost to the community when Utilities use coal, oil, or nuclear however that's not the reality of the Utility companies. Maybe the best approach is to give Utilities access to all our commercial, government and residential buildings to install Utility owned solar panels. That way people who cannot afford solar energy will not have to subsidize those who can.

Submitted by [Charlotte](#) (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 5:37am.

We the people have to get our heads together to help stop this from happening. First the word needs to be spread as this is the first I have heard on these matters. I would be totally happy to see these big folks like here in MI Consumers Energy out of business. I mean we are having to fight them over our wetlands right now that they are trying to destroy. To learn that we have found a way to do clean constant energy supplying to have it basically destroyed by those destroying the planet just really gets me. We have to ban together to move forward. Any lawyers out there with a clean energy heart that would help us fight? Anyway just my thoughts on the matter are I should have known?

Submitted by [Pat Williams](#) (not verified) on March 18, 2010 - 5:12am.

When a household or business invests in a solar system or wind turbine power system which generates excess power, why shouldn't it be paid for the infrastructure being provided to the community? We could have millions of little entrepreneurs across the nation in a relatively short time contributing to clean, renewable energy. This is how free enterprise is really supposed to work but rarely does with large corporations in control. They are doing it in parts of northern Europe now. My brother's neighbor in Sweden invested in a wind turbine that also supplies part of the power to the nearby town. The town itself has wind-powered government buildings including the schools.

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