

Thinking green in energy policy can put green in Iowa pocketbooks

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By David Osterberg

The Governor's Strategic Planning Council Iowa 2010 Report recommended creating a plan to market Iowa-produced wind energy. Most Iowans undoubtedly embrace this plan. Whether the motivation is to help the environment or the economy, wind energy carries great promise. However, I believe we should be more ambitious than just wind power in marketing renewable electricity.

Several studies in the past year concluded that thinking "green" in our energy policy will put more green dollars in Iowans' pocketbooks. First was the Governor's Energy Policy Task Force, which met for more than a year and last fall produced a bipartisan report calling for meaningful steps to encourage 1,000 Megawatts of new renewable energy in the state. This past March, a study for the Iowa Policy Project (IPP) demonstrated great opportunities to keep Iowa dollars working for Iowans by expanding our use of renewable power and encouraging conservation. A new report in July 2002 from the well-respected Union of Concerned Scientists also enumerated great economic and environmental benefits from developing renewable power.

Let's look at the IPP study, by Iowa State University researchers David Swenson and Liesl Eathington. They found that each \$1 million in sales of wind-produced electricity or of switchgrass co-fired with coal, generates more money throughout the Iowa economy than does \$1 million of traditional electricity production. The main reason for the difference is the purchase of out-of-state coal. Swenson and Eathington considered the coal-purchase savings of a combination of scenarios: (1) boosting wind-energy production slightly, (2) initiating switchgrass-firing equal to 5 percent of a 900-megawatt coal plant, and (3) counting the economic benefits of energy conservation programs already in place. The ISU researchers estimate that mix would represent about \$250 million of total industrial output. (Report available at www.iowapolicyproject.org).

You don't have to read a study, however, to understand that renewable energy has potential. Five Iowans this summer visited northern Europe on bicycles to view firsthand energy policies that encourage renewable power. The state of Schleswig Holstein in Germany now gets 18 percent of its electricity from wind power. Germany and Denmark dominate the world's manufacture and installation of wind turbines.

But wind is only part of the equation. Northern Europe also has begun to use crop residue and domestic and industrial waste to produce electricity and useful heat. Farmers near the town of Sakskobing, Denmark, now have a market for their wheat straw. It is burned in a plant that produces electricity and provides heat to 12,500 customers in two towns. (Pictures available at www.greenbike.org.) The demonstrated success of other countries is yet another reason for our state government to take action to encourage more renewable energy production and energy saving programs.

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In Iowa, fiscal troubles dominated the debate in Des Moines during the 2002 legislative session. I wish the senators and representatives had considered how expanding renewable power and conservation could have assisted the budget in the long run by keeping more dollars in the state instead of enhancing business in the coal and oil fields in Wyoming and Texas. Legislators could have taken steps to make Iowa less energy dependent without a significant cost to taxpayers, yet these ideas could not even receive a hearing. Not one of the recommendations of the Governor's Energy Policy Task Force was adopted during the last session. The next legislature needs to wake up and act on Iowa's long-term interests.

Besides the economic benefits, I think we all know the environmental benefits of renewable power and energy conservation. By reducing coal-produced electricity, we reduce hospital admissions for asthma; we clear the air locally; we reduce sulfur emissions that kill forests and reduce crop yields; we reduce mercury that contaminates the Great Lakes; and we take steps to combat global warming.

Ten years into the new century, Iowa can be a better, cleaner and richer place if we make much more of our electricity with our own renewable resources.

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