

Clean Energy Standards to be Redefined

Renewable Portfolio Standard Dead, for now

Bill Opalka | Nov 22, 2010 <http://www.energybiz.com/article/10/11/clean-energy-standards-be-redefined>

Even renewable energy's back-up plan for federal support appears to be off the table. The renewable electricity standard (RES) has been bandied about Capitol Hill for a decade. That includes wind, solar biomass and possibly hydro as a clean energy fuel source. Expanding the definition to include nuclear and possibly carbon capture turns that into a clean energy standard (CES).

The changeover in the U.S. House of Representatives from Republican to Democratic control will have numerous implications for renewable energy. The discussion was part of an election post-mortem webinar hosted by the law firm Chadbourne & Parke.

One of the speakers said the switch is a "net negative" for renewable energy. A common view was that energy incentives, mostly in the form of "tax extenders" for project development were as far as Congress was likely to go in the lame duck session in late November. A consensus view, even one admitted by President Obama himself, is that carbon cap-and-trade is dead in the next Congress. But a modest RES similar to the one that passed a Senate committee - 15 percent by 2021 including energy efficiency - now appears to be without a future as well.

"I think the major impact of the elections would be to turn that RES into a CES, turning that renewable electricity standard into a clean electricity standard that would include nuclear, would include carbon capture and storage, which I think is more in keeping with Republican mantra of 'more of all of the above'," said Jonathan Weisgall of MidAmerican Energy Holdings. "That of course changes things, because a federal RES has a goal of promoting renewables. A clean energy standard has a broader goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions."

Weisgall thinks the CES could be part of a broader energy bill, which has been difficult for Congress to pass in recent years because of so many competing interests vying for one. Richard Glick, of Iberdrola Renewable Energies USA, agreed that the change in the House leadership is the "death knell" for the RES.

It's time to deal with the new reality in Congress facing renewable energy, he said. "I think we need to broaden our minds in the renewable community and not be as doctrinaire as we've been in the past," Glick said. "If you broaden the definition you're going to have to increase the numbers we've been talking about," he added, perhaps in the 25 to 30 percent range. The move to a CES is not without precedent. The idea was floated in Arizona this year but was shot down rather quickly without an overall percentage increase.

The industry had hoped that the RES could be considered in the lame duck session late in November, but the speakers said the session will be consumed by pressing matters that have to be dealt with by year's end: continued federal spending that would run out in early December; the Bush tax cuts; and extending unemployment benefits.

This story first appeared in RenewablesBiz and was written by its editor, Bill Opalka

Views: 673

Comments: 5

Comments

More corporate welfare for the nuclear industry??

- Nov 23, 2010 - 1:06 PM

The nuclear industry has had 60 years of subsidies, which is what keeps it afloat. Building

a nuke today would be impossible without government insurance and loan guarantees. The insurance industry would not insure nukes because of the catastrophic risk, so the government promised to pick up the tab. Never forget that a whole city, state or region of the country can be poisoned for thousands of years from a nuclear accident.

Renewables have received a comparatively tiny amount of support from government. Changing from renewables to this so-called "clean" energy standard would let nuclear bullies push aside solar and wind and grab what little is now available. Making it harder to build solar and wind and shoving us towards more nuclear power would impoverish and endanger our country. We need the green economy for jobs and local business development – as well as a truly clean environment.

Congress needs to hear more from genuine renewables advocates. They hear a lot from lobbyists for nukes. Northern California utility PG&E for example spent more than any other utility on lobbying in 2008. Too much of it went to promote nuclear power (and to promote cap & trade which amounts to a giveaway to the polluters). Since then, while PG&E posed as "clean," the company fell far short of California's renewable portfolio standard.

Renewable energy is what we really need to survive and thrive. Please make it clear to your Congressmembers that nuclear power hurts the economy and the environment. Unfortunately PG&E's nuclear preference has the effect of compromising the California Congressional delegation.

A little background on PG&E greenwashing. Californians were forced to bail out two nukes in the 1990s to the tune of \$28 billion because they were considered "uneconomical stranded assets." PG&E & Edison took that money and ran around "investing" in dirty coal plants in New England, Indonesia and elsewhere. PG&E Corp. (the holding company) forced PG&E Co. (the utility) into bankruptcy in 2001 to protect the corporation's dirty coal assets – but later the power plant side of the business went bankrupt also in 2003 and lost everything. That's when PG&E declared itself "clean" – when bankruptcy cleaned out all its dirty assets!

In the last couple years, the company has signed more renewables contracts, mostly because it has serious PR problems and faces competition from local governments who are developing non-profit agencies like Marin Energy Authority, which offer much more renewable energy without raising rates. PG&E poured \$46 million into a ballot measure this June trying to kill off such green competition. It lost.

California's electorate has been energized by its efforts to defend and expand renewable energy. The nuclear industry hopes to confuse people by replacing the Renewable Energy Standard with this so-called "Clean Energy Standard." It's just the latest chapter in its long campaign to stunt the growth of renewables.

Barbara George, Women's Energy Matters

edit reply

Wind energy exists due to public subsidies

- Nov 23, 2010 - 7:41 AM

Wind energy exists due to public subsidies that encourage a high cost, unreliable, environmentally-damaging energy source that can't be stored and has no capacity value. The wind industry's reason for existence is public subsidies and land grabs. Its benefits are net negative from the public and environmental perspectives. While its adverse impacts are actual to the environment, wildlife, rate and taxpayers.

I'd rather risk certainty of CO2 global warming with catastrophes ahead, than fall victim to Big Wind predators who have arrived in the U.S. to rescue us from the same.

The Renewable Energy Standard positions the public to fund environmental destruction by wind energy. It provides no measurable return to the public for the use of our money and the vast, precious, and finite natural resources it industrializes, (to counter the effects of industrialization?).

The end of our federal support for wind energy is a happy ending.

Thank You,
Barbara Durkin

reply

Agreement on CES

- Nov 22, 2010 - 12:37 PM

It seems that the differences between portable energy sources, (e.g. gasoline and diesel) and the stationary uses (e.g. natural gas and electricity) are lost in the political landscape. The term "clean" is used to only discuss non-hydrocarbon based uses without considering the impact that these massive transitions have in environmental costs.

Hydrogen is bandied about as the "clean" portable energy source, but the assumption is that the infrastructure and the loss of energy content are not an impact. Recently, a local transit district flushed \$54M down a drain to build a hydrogen fueling station that served one bus. They now have shut down the program and are complaining they don't have resources to maintain bus schedules, forcing more people back to cars. Did that save any carbon? Did it reduce congestion? Did it reduce pollution in any sense?

Now we are pushing hard to switch over to wind and solar for electricity. The panels are increasingly being built in China using coal fired 25,000-40,000 BTU/kwh plants to build the cells. Even if we don't consider the impact of polluting now to save pollution over the next 20 years, it is very unlikely that the net impact of solar is positive. Just comparing BTUs panels would have to produce three times the energy consumed to build them just to break even while the numbers coming back so far are close to one. Do we have any real hard data concerning the impact of producing solar panels?

Wind is better but still problematic because we lack storage. The environmental impact of wind is not well discussed except when a politician's "view" might be affected; right now, the best and most managable storage over a 50 year period still is pumped-hydro. That isn't very sexy but it does work and has improved over the last 50 years where as batteries are a long way from even being economically competitive.

Before jumping off the cliff, it should be up to the proponents of solar and wind to demonstrate that these technologies are clearly beneficial, not harmful in the numbers that they are insisting we use. That has not been done.

Until then we have nuclear which has demonstrated long term value, albeit with some problems. This is one of those discussions where the pursuit of excellence is lost due to powerful but narrowly focused zealots.

reply

Why are we talking about renewables?

- Nov 22, 2010 - 10:23 AM

It would be nice if we had some agreement on what we are trying to accomplish before we begin spending money to accomplish "it", whatever "it" is.

If we are seeking energy independence, neither solar nor wind is a significant issue

because neither replaces imported oil.

If we are seeking to reduce CO2 emissions, nuclear and coal with CCS both make sense. If we are seeking to promote "clean" power generation, then coal with CCS would still present problems.

If we are seeking to convert to renewables, then nuclear fission has issues, though nuclear fusion would not have issues.

However, we must understand that solar and wind cannot support a reliable grid without storage. Solar energy storage in molten salt is demonstrated technology, which is on the verge of being incorporated in multiple power plants. Wind power storage is yet to be demonstrated at commercial scale, with the exception of pumped storage hydro. In both cases, replacing continuous generation sources (gas CCT, coal, nuclear, geothermal) with intermittent generation sources (solar, wind) requires installation of ~5 GW of nameplate capacity for each GW of continuous generation to be replaced.

reply

Good investment or not?

- Nov 22, 2010 - 8:06 AM

Wind and solar require large tax breaks and special treatment of depreciation to get investors to build them. What will happen to these facilities when the tax breaks run out? Will we have to provide them with another tax break and other goodies to keep the plants operational? Will the wind farm owners walk off with their pockets stuffed full of money leaving the land owner(s) with hundreds of broken down wind turbines or non-functioning solar panels cluttering the landscape along with large transmission lines and towers.

If I may be allowed to engage in freight-hauling metaphors: 1) Building a nuclear facility, supercritical coal-fired power plant, or combined-cycle is like buying a fleet of long-haul 18 wheelers, very expensive but it hauls many tons of freight reliably. 2) Building a wind farm is a bit like buying a fleet of Corvettes and putting a class V trailer hitches on them expecting each to reliably haul 17,000# of freight and then having to build a bunch of new roads to the middle of nowhere to haul the freight on. 3) Building a solar farm is like much like #2 except using Ferraris instead of a Corvettes.

If your intent is to haul freight reliably, you invest in the long haul trucks. You might need to expand the existing roads for a short distance but you are not building eight lane highways to the middle of nowhere to handle occasional traffic and investing in a whole second fleet long-haul trucks as backup.

We were a great economic power but we are ignoring the economic realities that made us great.