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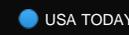


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In Texas, different ideas on fossil fuels, renewables

Sammy Roth, The Desert Sun 2:32 p.m. PST January 19, 2016



(Photo: Getty Images)

California already gets a quarter of its electricity from clean sources, and Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill last year upping the state's renewable energy mandate to 50 percent by 2030. For Golden State policymakers and activists, the question at this point isn't how much energy the state should get from renewables: It's how to get to as close to 100 percent as possible, as quickly as possible.

That's the narrative I'm used to writing about. So it was fascinating to spend some time last week in fossil fuel-friendly Texas, where I joined a few dozen journalists for a two-day workshop hosted by the University of Texas at Austin's Energy Institute. (Full disclosure: The Energy Institute paid for my travel and hotel. There was no expectation I would write anything about the conference.)

We heard from a variety of UT Austin experts on oil markets, solar technology, the drilling technique known as fracking and other topics. I half-expected the speakers to spew propaganda on behalf of Texas' powerful oil and gas industry, or to question climate science. The Energy Institute lists oil giant ConocoPhillips [among its funders](#), as well as the fossil fuel-loving Koch Foundation.

In the end, that wasn't the case: The experts who spoke at the workshop uniformly agreed that climate change is a serious problem, and that clean energy ultimately needs to be part of the solution. But on the whole, they were less gung ho about renewables — and more sympathetic to some fossil fuels — than the California academics, policymakers and activists I'm used to interviewing.

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The moon shines over a solar plant near the southern end of the Salton Sea on Nov. 23, 2015. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Take Michael Webber, the Energy Institute's deputy director and a mechanical engineering professor. Webber lauded natural gas as a "domestic clean fuel," crediting the boom in American gas production to a combination of market forces and favorable government policy. He mentioned the Energy Policy Act of 2005, which exempted hydraulic fracturing from aspects of the Safe Drinking Water Act.

"This is a good moment for the power of markets," Webber said, referring to the ongoing shale gas revolution.

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Supporters say natural gas can play a key role in confronting climate change, because it emits less carbon than coal and oil do when burned. Environmental groups in California and elsewhere largely disagree. They argue that limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius — the target endorsed by 195 nations in Paris in December — will require most of the world's fossil fuels to stay in the ground.



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At UT Austin, though, several speakers touted natural gas as a smart alternative to coal and oil. Among them was Texas State Geologist Scott Tinker, who warned that pushing for an all-renewable future could have unintended consequences. He didn't spell out what those consequences were, but he implied that higher energy prices and an unreliable electricity grid could be on the horizon.

"I worry that we don't always know what end of the chainsaw we're pulling on," Tinker



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said. "Intentions are good — I don't question intentions. But I want to look at outcomes."



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Tinker raised some eyebrows when he implored journalists to "quit using religious terms to describe science," adding that, "denial is not a scientific term." It was a clear reference to the ongoing debate among journalists over how to describe politicians and activists who reject the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activities are causing dangerous changes to the planet's climate. (Hearing Tinker's remark, an Energy Institute official sitting near me muttered, "Christ.")



A dead Joshua tree frames another that has lost some of its branches at Joshua Tree National Park on May 13, 2014. Researchers have found that Joshua tree populations are declining in some areas of the park due to climate change. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

Tinker also spoke to the importance of dealing with global warming. He referenced recent models from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, saying none of the models show safe levels of warming.

"I hear it said all the time: 'Are you for energy, or for the environment?' My answer is, 'Yes,'" Tinker said.



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Webber, meanwhile, called climate change "one of the most critical contexts through which energy decisions should be made." He predicted that solar panels will keep

getting more efficient and that electric vehicles will become much more common. He also noted that most modern-day energy technologies were invented more than a century ago.

"Maybe it's time for us to have some new ideas, because we've been using these for so long," Webber said. "Things do change, but they change very slowly."

It's also worth noting that Texas has installed more wind power than any other state, although solar has been slower to take off. At one point during the workshop, Brian Korgel — director of UT Austin's Center for Next Generation Photovoltaics — said he was going to make a "provocative" statement: that solar energy is "coming into a revolutionary time period."



Workers build the 550-megawatt Desert Sunlight solar farm in Desert Center, about an hour east of the Coachella Valley, on Aug. 20, 2014. (Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun)

In most of California, that sentiment long ago became conventional wisdom, among Democrats and Republicans alike. In Texas, apparently, it's a little more controversial.

"Personally, I hope oil and gas production decreases to zero," Korgel said. He added, however, that he doesn't think that will be possible.

One more anecdote from Austin: Over a group dinner one night, Webber noted that he left the Los Angeles area a decade ago to return home to Texas. As a born-and-raised Californian, I was shocked that anyone would leave the Golden State. I asked him why he had gone back.

He replied that if he could reform Houston — the energy capital of the universe — he could reform the world.

Makes sense to me.

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