

https://www.news-gazette.com/opinion/guest-commentary/guest-commentary-from-drill-baby-drill-to-mine-china-mine/article_a3127b4e-106d-5a10-9125-c8bca2c62d6f.html

Guest Commentary: Seth Whitehead

Guest Commentary | From 'drill, Baby, drill' to 'mine, China, mine'?

Nov 1, 2020

As calls for the United States to “transition” away from oil and go 100 percent renewable gain traction, an overlooked question begs to be answered: Is a “mine, baby, mine” policy better than “drill, baby, drill”?

“Keep It In the Ground” groups, of course, are diametrically opposed to both. But ironically, should that movement’s objective of ending all U.S. oil and natural-gas development and transitioning to 100 percent renewable energy become policy, an unprecedented expansion of mining will be required. And most of it will be done by China.

China has a near global monopoly on the mining of cobalt, lithium and other rare-earth elements that are essential to producing the solar panels, wind turbines and batteries needed to capture energy generated by the sun and wind. Manhattan Institute senior fellow Mark P. Mills recently testified to Congress that replacing conventional vehicles with electric vehicles alone would drive up the demand for cobalt and lithium by more than 2,000 percent.

He also testified that demand for rare-earth elements would rise between 300 and 1,000 percent by 2050 just to meet Paris Accord emission-reduction targets. Copper, indium, silver and graphite demand would also skyrocket as the result of a renewable-energy revolution, according to Mills.

“Not in my backyard” opposition to mining by U.S. “Keep It In the Ground” groups is just as strong as their opposition to fossil fuels. For instance, the Sierra Club’s mining policy states, “Mining by its very nature is a dirty business and highly disruptive of the natural and human environment. ... Because of these negative impacts, additional or new mining must be kept to a minimum to meet essential human needs, and alternatives to mining undisturbed ore bodies should be encouraged and pursued.”

Environmental groups have already indicated they would oppose a Biden administration’s plans to increase domestic mining. So unless the Sierra Club and similarly powerful groups are planning a sudden about face, any policy aimed at “transitioning” the U.S. off oil will in reality be forfeiting our long-sought energy independence and actually “transitioning” energy dependence to China and other foreign sources.

Such a situation would likely result in the renewable-energy equivalent of the United States being under the OPEC oil cartel’s thumb, as it was for many decades prior to America’s recent oil and natural-gas renaissance. As Ashley Feng, a research associate for China studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, recently wrote in Scientific American: “In the clean-energy economy of the future, critical minerals will be just as essential – and geopolitical – as oil is today.”

To make matters worse, any supposed “transition” off oil will really be a transition back to importing most of the huge quantities of oil we will inevitably still consume, forfeiting the geopolitical leverage our oil and gas renaissance has allotted us in the process.

A whopping 55 percent of U.S. oil use is non-gasoline. That means electric vehicles and electrification provide no alternative to a majority of the oil the U.S. uses. Planes don’t fly without jet fuel. Heavy machinery and trucks do not operate without diesel.

And the 31 percent of our oil consumption that is used to make more than 6,000 petroleum-based products we rely on everyday – including essential health care supplies, pharmaceuticals and tech gadgets such as cellphones and computers – cannot be replaced by wind and solar energy.

The fact remains that even if gasoline-powered vehicles disappear from American roadways overnight, we still going need a lot of oil for a long time to come.

But what about the environment? As geologist and filmmaker Scott Tinker has noted, “The sun and wind are renewable, but the stuff that captures it and backs it up with batteries, it’s not renewable. There’s nothing renewable about it.”

Although we wouldn’t see the front end of the often-overlooked environmental impact of a renewable-energy transition — the mining that would largely be taking place overseas — we would definitely see the back end in the form of millions of tons of decommissioned and non-recyclable solar panels, batteries and wind turbines filling our landfills.

Which again begs the question: Is “mine, China, mine” better than “drill, baby, drill”? We could soon find out that the answer is no.

Seth Whitehead is executive director of the Illinois Petroleum Resources Board, a nonprofit organization that provides public awareness and education programs regarding the Illinois oil- and natural-gas-production industry and works to clean up and restore abandoned oilfield sites throughout the state. Its programs are funded entirely by voluntary contributions of oil and natural-gas producers and royalty owners in Illinois.

This Week's Circulars

Acade

Academy Sports + Outdoors

Hover for Circular

Family Dollar

Hover for Circular

Pet Supermarket

Hover for Circular

Trending Videos