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Unraveling tangled energy narrative requires critical thinking

By [Mella McEwen](#), MRT.com/Midland Reporter-Telegram Published 8:46 pm CST, Saturday, December 5, 2020



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A number of pressures are weaving the nation's energy narrative into a ball, making it difficult to know which direction to follow.

Attempting to unravel that narrative, the Texas Independent Producers and Royalty Owners' Association hosted Scott Tinker, director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Quoting Aristotle -- "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it" -- Tinker said that philosophy is important to today's energy narrative.

Major oil companies – such as Occidental, which celebrated its new solar farm near Goldsmith a year ago -- are investing in renewable energy. But critical thinking is needed about fossil fuels, renewables and
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"He's talking about critical thinking," he said.

Energy, the environment and the economy are so intertwined, Tinker said. They impact everything from climate change to education, gender equity, health care, housing, hunger to immigration and even war.

Tinker, who has traveled the globe helping bring energy to developing communities, said the understanding that energy will help the world's poor is warranted. He estimated there are over 1 billion people globally without access to electricity and a third of the world's population doesn't have access to clean cooking. Smoke inhalation from burning wood for cooking, light and warmth kills 3 million people a year, Tinker said.

"What poor countries want to do is industrialize like we have, but not utilize as much as we do," he said, noting that his refrigerator uses nine times as much energy as a person in Ethiopia uses each year.

But the call is there to greatly reduce, if not completely eliminate, the use of fossil fuels, replacing them with renewable energy.

Tinker said some people have voiced a goal of 98 percent of the world's energy coming from renewables by the year 2100.

"Some say it should happen by 2040," he said. "Really? I worry people believe that's possible or even think it's a good idea."

Critical thinking about renewables needs to include the fact that all energy sources impact the environment, even

renewables, he said. Tinker said that the massive amounts of wind turbines and solar panels needed to meet global energy demand would require extensive mining of the rare earths and minerals required to build the turbines and panels. And then, he said, there's the amount of land needed to house the turbines and panels and then issues with their disposal after they cease to function.

Through improved efficiency, North America and Europe have flattened their electric demand and, as a result, emissions. Tinker said the greatest amount of emissions come from China and non-China Asia. If China were to adapt America's coal-to-natural gas ratio, he said that would remove 2.8 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere annually.

Tinker recommended increased use of natural gas, more carbon capture, use and storage, improved nuclear technology, coal with CCUS technology, geothermal and hydro power and centralized wind power distribution like Texas has as more environmentally friendly energy mixes.

The key will be healthy economies, he said.

"A healthy economy lets you invest in the environment," he said. "The dirtiest environments in the world are in the poorest countries. You can't imagine the level of environmental impact poverty brings."

That has been his focus as he has spread his message around the globe.

"I want to make sure economies are healthy enough they can clean up their environment. That's what's been missing from the conversation," he said.

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