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Brian Keane

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Consumer Demand is the Answer

Posted June 24, 2008 | 12:00 PM (EST)

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The U.S. Senate is currently stalled on approving renewals for clean energy production tax credits. These tax incentives have promoted investment in the clean and renewable energy industry for the last fifteen years. In years that the credits have been in place, the clean energy industry has grown at an ever-increasing rate, but when the credits have been allowed to expire, investment has dropped and growth has slowed dramatically. We should insist that our politicians help create a business climate in which a clean energy industry will flourish by renewing the clean energy production tax credits.

However, a clean energy policy that will make the United States more energy independent and significantly reduce our nation's impact on climate change will not be founded on legislation alone. Such a policy must also be led by consumer demand. Policies and legislation can change and energy prices will fluctuate, but if consumer demand for clean and renewable energy grows it will create a robust marketplace for alternative energy, which will guarantee our nation's clean energy future.

Passing the clean energy tax stimulus legislation alone won't create consumer demand. To increase Americans' desire for alternative energy sources, the energy industry should approach the promotion of clean and renewable energy the way corporate America approaches selling any product -- through old-fashioned business principles like salesmanship, consumer education, marketing initiatives and consumer product research. Put another way, the iPod is in hot demand - so hot, it doesn't need federal policies to help them push sales. We can and should do the same for clean, renewable energy.

Consumer education and marketing will play an important role in increasing the demand for clean energy. Some consumers still believe that when the wind stops blowing or clouds cover the sun their homes will lose power. Others believe that buying and using clean energy requires the adoption of some kind of hippie lifestyle. We must educate consumers that clean energy sources are reliable, mainstream and simply do not require any lifestyle changes.

Beyond basic information about clean energy, consumers need guidance for how to take action. In many states, clean energy already exists on the grid, yet most consumers don't realize this or know how to purchase it.

Marketing clean energy to consumers can have a significant impact on the demand for cleaner energy sources. To spread the word that clean energy is available and reliable, SmartPower has worked with communities to launch comprehensive community outreach campaigns, through newsletters, public service announcements, letters to the editor, community events, door-to-door canvassing, internet outreach, municipal competitions, school-based outreach and educational forums. These efforts have been effective: In the past year alone, close to eighty towns and municipalities in Connecticut and twenty-three in Pennsylvania have signed on to SmartPower's 20% clean energy by 2010 campaign.

The time is right to speak to consumers about energy options like wind and solar power. Phrases like 'green chic' and 'eco-living' are on magazine covers across the newsstands. Last week, Discovery launched Planet Green, a new television channel devoted completely to an "eco-lifestyle." [Wal-Mart](#), Staples, Whole Foods and other bottom line-minded, big-box stores are equipping their roofs with solar panels. Meanwhile, the price at the pump is a daily reminder that we must reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. We need to encourage and educate people to take the next steps to make a change.

In the late 1970s, the U.S. was in the midst of a conflict in the Middle East and an energy crisis was disrupting our economy here at home. President Carter responded by proposing a comprehensive national energy plan. He even went so far as to use the pulpit of his presidency to address the nation and rally public support. However, shortly after Carter's term ended the crisis was averted, and our country lost its commitment to the development of clean energy technology. We must now heed this lesson: If consumer demand had been stronger, and we hadn't simply relied upon federal legislation, lasting changes would have been made to our national energy policy.

As the clean energy tax credits are debated in Congress and our country looks to adopt a long-term clean energy strategy, let's not forget that the clean energy market will expand as consumer demand to purchase clean energy grows. That demand has to be built one home, one business and one community at a time. Undoubtedly, widespread demand will ultimately lead to responsible policies on both a local and national level.

Brian F. Keane is President of SmartPower (smartpower.org), a nationwide nonprofit marketing organization dedicated to promoting clean, renewable energy and energy efficiency. SmartPower's tagline is: "Clean energy is real. It's here. And it's working. Let's make more!"

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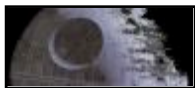


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I was reading an environmental web site, and the info was posted that the U.S. spent more last year on the occupation of Iraq, than what the entire planet invested last year to develop alternative energy.

Budget for the war in Iraq: at least \$150 billion

Entire-wide budget for alternative energy development in 2007: \$117 billion

Our priorities are pretty bad.

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Consumer Demand is *a* component of an Energy Effort, but I strongly disagree that it should be THE driving force:

* We can enjoy huge economies by agreeing to a *common* solution up-front, and instituting the infrastructure to support it. Such support and infrastructure will not happen without an agreed-upon solution -- who would want to take the capital/market risk of providing support to a solution that may not endure? Who would want to take the capital/market risk of introducing a solution that may not be supported? With a centralized (government-led) approach, we finesse this Chicken-Egg conundrum.

* Most energy "solutions" involve the risk of externalities imposed on Society, in one form or another (e.g., pollution). Sometimes it is in our collective best interest to select a Societally appropriate solution rather than just the cheapest or most profitable option.

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