

OP-ED COLUMN

In Pursuit of Our Energy Future: What Is Noble Enough?

Edward Finklea

At October's Energy Summit 2008, the first annual conference to be sponsored by Energy Action Northwest, Bonneville Power's Steve Wright posed the relevant question that challenges our energy future: *What is noble enough?*

Taken from a children's novel, the question asked by Administrator Wright is one that all of us in the energy field struggle with every day... in a world with no single perfect energy solution, how do we plot a course to a future where energy is: a) clean enough to meet our obligation to environmental stewardship; b) not so expensive that ordinary people can't afford energy; and c) reliable enough to keep our complex, highly technical economy going without power blackouts?

Fortunately, over the course of the Summit, attended by more than 125 business, labor, energy and environmental leaders, our keynote speakers and panelists alike provided context, perspective and answers to this complex question.

Take the issue of renewable sources of electric power for our region, for example. The good news is solar and wind can and will become an ever growing percentage of electricity generation for the Northwest. The technological and political will exists to make this a reality. But before we become too starry-eyed at this prospect, we need to plan for clean-burning natural gas turbines that will back up these renewable sources when the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow.

Let's look forward to the day when we have moved away from reliance on imported oil in the transportation sector. We can and will embrace both plug-in electric passenger cars, and compressed natural gas vehicles for hauling trash and powering taxis, transit buses, commercial trucks and even passenger cars. But let's remember that to cut the umbilical cord to oil, we must find ways to support development of a new generation of "filling stations" that make electric and compressed natural gas vehicles easy to use.

And, while it is clear that capturing energy efficiency opportunities is still the "low hanging fruit" available for short term progress, it is equally clear that we must give our local businesses more incentives to invest in technology like combined heat and power, and provide homeowners with incentives to invest in all forms of energy efficiency.

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The Job Keepers.

Energy Summit Northwest attendees also heard Bill Walker of the Alaskan Gasline Port Authority describe the tremendous energy potential that exists if natural gas from Prudhoe Bay is brought by pipe to Valdez, Alaska, liquefied, and shipped to re-gasification terminals on the West Coast. We learned that 8.3 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day could be available for use on the West Coast simply by linking Alaska with the other West Coast states through a supply chain based on LNG. Of course, that prospect depends on our willingness to invest in energy infrastructure development, such as transmission lines, LNG terminals and pipelines that are often the source of controversy. Is the end noble enough to justify the means?

My answer is yes.

Imagine a tomorrow where Alaskan natural gas arrives on LNG tankers at terminals in Oregon. This clean fuel is then used to help power gas turbines that back up wind and solar generators. It is burned in combined heat and power facilities inside Oregon and Washington factories. It powers high-efficiency furnaces and water heaters in our homes. It fuels compressed natural gas trash haulers, taxis, transit buses and passenger cars that have been freed of their "addiction" to foreign oil.

This is not a flight of fancy. It is a reality that can be ours...a reality where our economic aspirations are aligned with our responsibility to our environment.

But we will only get there if policymakers and citizens alike can free themselves from the self-defeating notion that economic progress challenges our environmental future. If our region begins to embrace the search for balance, instead of continued conflict in the development of energy policies, we can find a solution that is noble enough, and one that will work for all of us.



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