

Charles Komanoff is not an environmentalist

Charles Komanoff is a valiant activist for changes from fossil fuel guzzling. And I agree with him that many of the opponents to the giant wind project in Nantucket Sound appear to be NIMBYs when they say they support wind power but not there where they live or vacation (though most opponents question the value of large-scale wind anywhere). But his desire to replace fossil and nuclear fuels, which together provide almost 95% of our energy, appears to have caused a blindness to wind power's shortcomings for achieving even a small part of that goal. By presenting himself as an energy expert, when in fact he is not an engineer but an economist, and studiously rejecting mitigating reports, he attempts to browbeat the doubters with a simple-minded formula that every kilowatt of power from wind means one less kilowatt from fossil or nuclear fuel. Though easy to say and believe, the tenet is not true.

If every bit of power generated by wind turbines does indeed go into the grid, the formula as stated is true, assuming there are not substantial renewable sources in the area (as in Vermont, which gets more than a third of its electricity from hydropower). In fact, if there is hydropower in an area, it is likely to be the first source to be switched off; relatively clean natural gas plants are the next choice. Base-load coal and nuclear plants, which cannot as readily be switched on and off, are unlikely to be affected.

As wind-generated power feeds into the grid, therefore, power from other sources is indeed cut back. But the burning of fuel is not necessarily reduced – thermal plants are simply switched from generation to standby. Their electricity output is reduced to maintain the grid's balance, but their fuel consumption continues.

Unlike a diesel-powered backup generator for the home, most thermal plants cannot simply switch on and off; they take hours and even days to heat up or cool down. Even for those that can switch more quickly, they use more fuel in doing so. And because of the constant fluctuations of power from wind turbines, it is unwise to do so. A rise in the wind only means that a drop will follow, and so the standby source must be kept burning so it can switch back to generation mode at any moment.

Komanoff's vision of the ways things ought to be is threatened by environmentalists who haven't swallowed the sales spiel and instead have determined that industrial wind turbines on rural and especially wild sites bring negative impacts that far outweigh the elusive benefits. He spent almost two months repeatedly pestering an environmental leader in western Massachusetts for opposing giant wind turbines in the Berkshires. Though Komanoff contacted her through a mutual friend, she quickly saw that he was not at all interested in discussion and she rightly ignored his continuing prods. He took this turning of the cheek as a sign of defeat and posted the "exchange" on his website as a trophy of victory.

But if one does not deny the impacts nor the shortcomings of big wind on the grid, the only conclusion is that the benefits do not justify its industrialization of rural and wild areas. Komanoff and other pro-wind environmentalists are on the wrong side of this issue.

In a Dec. 2002 letter to anti-big wind environmentalist Bob Boyle, he asserts that the noise level at 2,000 feet from a large wind turbine is barely more than that in a remote forest and less than that by a remote pond. Besides ignoring the cumulative effect of a large collection of turbines, Komanoff appears to be ignorant of the difference between the pleasant sounds of nature and the intrusive sounds of giant machinery.

In a Jan. 2003 open letter to environmentalists on behalf of building 130 giant turbines in Nantucket Sound, he writes, "The value of the windmills goes beyond energy-share percentages to the plane of symbols and images. ... Seeing the beauty in windmills could be a turning point, making possible a wider appreciation of what are now, we should admit, a beleaguered minority's values: trust in energy efficiency, devotion to conservation, identification with the natural world." It is irrelevant (if not insane) to connect aesthetic admiration of industrial wind turbines with identification with nature. One can enjoy both, of course, but they certainly are not connected. And one certainly cannot enjoy both at the same time. It is also illogical to assert that building more power generation plants, however "green" one believes them to be, encourages values of conservation. If anything, it provides a "green" light to continue using as much energy as ever.

In a May 2003 letter to environmentalist Alex Matthiessen, Komanoff presents a variation of his 1-to-1 tenet: "To stand in the way of eminently reasonable windpower projects like Cape Wind and Jones Beach is to encourage the continuing destruction of Earth's air, water and climate by fossil fuels. ... A decision to stop the Cape Wind and Jones Beach wind farms is a decision to keep polluting and poisoning."

That is true only if one accepts without question -- on faith, as it were -- that wind power can actually make a difference on the scale of its own environmental and social impact. Which, of course, Komanoff does believe. But where is the evidence from countries that have already installed substantial numbers of turbines that their fossil fuel use, their pollution and poisoning, has decreased because of wind power? The evidence is instead that substantial installation of wind power has had no positive effect at all.

In "Wind power must be visible," a June 6, 2003, opinion in the Providence Journal, Komanoff most admonishingly presents his thesis: "[E]very unit not produced because a wind project has been blocked means more carbon fuels burned, more carbon dioxide filling the earth's atmosphere, more ruinous climate change. ... And, sure as daylight, continued reliance on oil will not only contaminate the environment but also fuel the cycle of war and terrorism. ... Nor does it seem to matter to them that other precious -- albeit less prosperous -- places, from West Virginia mountaintops to Wyoming sandhills, are sacrificed daily to yield the very fuels that the wind farm would displace." An attractively dramatic alternative, but is there any evidence of wind projects reducing environmental ruin, let alone war and terrorism? Komanoff never presents any.

In "Wind power works," a Jan. 8, 2005, opinion in the Berkshire Eagle, he revives this Manichaeian doctrine that wind power is the good whose turn it is to conquer the darkness of fossil fuels. In a direct attack on the environmental group Green Berkshires, he warns of their denial of this truth. Similarly in "Wind power's benefits outweigh risk to scenery," a September 2005 opinion in the Hill Country Observer, he writes, "Through dependence on fossil fuels, humankind has come to a point where a windmill-less Adirondack vista or Berkshire ridgeline is hitched to ruined climate and global violence. Conversely, admitting clean, quiet, graceful windmills into our Northeast landscapes could show the way out of this dependence and to the recovery and continuance of our world." Komanoff leaves no room for discussion here, no room for honestly assessing industrial wind's own negative impacts or examining the claimed benefits. There is only salvation or doom: Accept wind power development or die.

The message of redemption continues with "In the wind," a September 18, 2005, opinion in the Albany Times Union, in which he slithers under the mantle of environmentalist Dave Brower (deceased) to claim that the construction of ten 425-ft-high turbines at an abandoned mine site in the Adirondacks would be an act of "restoring Earth." Most environmentalists might suggest that restoring the site would be to return it to wilderness, not to simply change the use from one industry to another. But Komanoff's brand of environmentalism, one he shares with many who once put nature first, is nothing without conquest: "Good" human use is better than no use at all, than mere wilderness. This is someone who doesn't know the difference between man-made machine noise and rustling leaves or lapping water. He is not an environmentalist.

by Eric Rosenbloom, December 8, 2005

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