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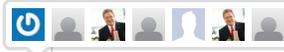
**James Conca**, Contributor

I cover the underlying drivers of energy, technology and society.

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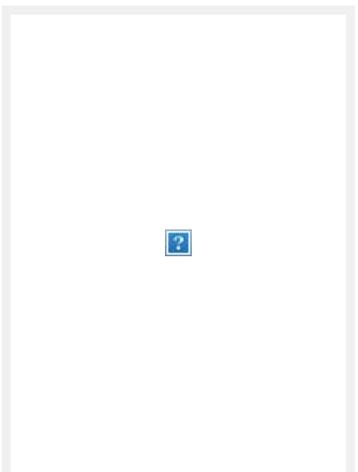
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# What's Wrong With Obama's Energy Policy?

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Not much, considering the twin handcuffs from both sides and the sudden abundance of natural gas. The ideological embrace of renewables at all costs and the knee-jerk rejection of safe nuclear power, together with the new-found ease of hydraulic fracturing, has forced the President to move in the only direction he can to reduce CO2 emissions – ramp up natural gas and ramp down coal.



President Barack Obama (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Nothing else will matter much for the rest of this decade, although increases in efficiency and vehicle CAFÉ standards won't hurt. That's because it's all in the numbers. Large numbers. To effect change on a global scale, you need to change the generation source of trillions of kWhrs. And the only things that can do that in any reasonable time frame is natural gas and nuclear. The newfound abundance of gas and the ease of construction of gas plants overwhelmingly argue for gas in the short-term.



Fracking With

Proposed new source performance standards for power plants by EPA further favor gas over coal. An excellent review of these issues, plus detailed policy recommendations, can be found in a report released last month from the Breakthrough Institute ([Coal Killer](#)).

The immediate wisdom of President Obama's strategy can be seen in its evident success: the

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United States leads the world in CO2 emission-reductions. Over the last 5 years, coal's share of electricity *production* in the U.S. has dropped from about one-half to one-third, while gas has increased from one-fifth to over one-third. Nuclear has held steady at about one-fifth as has hydro at a little over one-fifteenth. Everything else is of local importance only.

Accompanying this reduction in emissions are the other benefits to overall human health, since coal was killing about 20,000 Americans a year and gas only kills about 4,000. (Compare this to almost none for wind and actually none for nuclear).

True, gas is still a fossil fuel but from any perspective – water used, environmental destruction from mining, lives lost, air and water polluted, CO2 emitted, cost and ease of construction – gas beats coal hands down, even with gas' volatile pricing.

Most important of all, however, this gas-for-coal approach is the single strategy that has bipartisan support.

But replacing coal with gas only gets us so far in addressing climate change concerns. Total replacement of coal by gas would merely slow the rate of CO2-increases in the atmosphere, not reverse or even stop it. Since atmospheric CO2 recently topped 400 ppm, this is important.

Recognizing this climate brick wall we are heading for, the President is still pushing heavy subsidies for renewables. At the same time, we will have to watch as several new nuclear plants being built in the U.S. come online and operate successfully before we seriously expand new nuclear ([New Plants](#)).

Hopefully, by 2030 or so we can achieve a truly balanced mix that can reduce emissions sufficiently

to mitigate the worst effects ([What Is Our Energy Future?](#)).

But only if the world follows. Even with China's massive push in renewables and nuclear, the world as a whole is still increasing fossil fuel use much more than alternatives.

Unfortunately, the large increase in renewables has done little to reduce our emissions, since gas is so heavily called-upon to load-follow wind and solar and their capacity factors are so low. Indeed, for every MWhr of renewables installed, there needs to be almost a MWhr of gas installed as well. This was the real reason that an old gas-man like T. Boone Pickens suddenly embraced

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**James Conca**  
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I have been a scientist in the field of the earth and environmental sciences for 31 years, specializing in geologic disposal of nuclear waste, energy-related research, subsurface transport and environmental clean-up of heavy metals. I have found that important societal issues involving science and technology are rarely made on the basis of science.

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*The author is a Forbes contributor. The opinions expressed are those of the writer.*

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wind energy. But even that initiative failed.

Then there's the bizarre examples like the Pacific Northwest where wind is mainly replacing hydro, rendering the emission gains zero ([Wind beats out hydro](#)).

No, it is gas that is doing all the climate work right now.

Which begs the question of why we need the renewable part of that renewable-gas coupling with its large costs and large physical footprint. Combining natural gas with nuclear would provide more reliability, more load-following to demand, less environmental damage and less CO2 emissions than gas plus renewables could ever accomplish.

Let's face it, we don't have a rational long-term energy or climate plan. It's just lucky that fracking emerged so quickly to give us an alternative to coal that could be implemented right now.

Yes, fracking has issues, and the Administration is trying to address them. The Bureau of Land Management recently proposed rules governing fracking operations on public lands ([Fracking Rules](#)) that would strengthen well integrity standards, impose first-time chemical disclosure requirements and address wastewater management, but they are still weak.

So the President is pursuing the only path available at this time that actually decreases CO2 emissions in any significant way anytime soon. No mean feat in a country that keeps shooting itself in the foot.

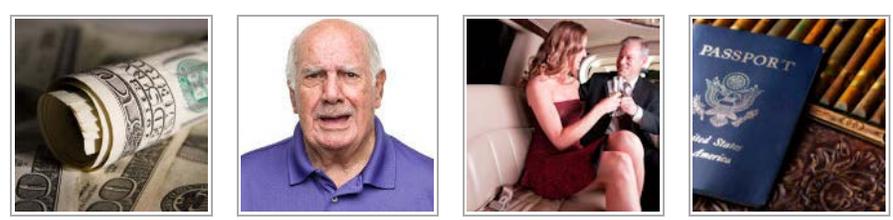
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**Dean Scheu** 6 days ago



Rising green house gases which causes environment problems like rising surface temperature, CO2 accumulation in atmosphere has taken many lives throughout year. There is an need to generate electricity using renewable resources and need to switch over natural gas instead coal. With contribute largest share in increasing pollution there is a need to look another policy to tame the situation by cutting GHG s and move to Renewable sources.

Thank you  
Dean Scheu

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**NortheasternEE** 6 days ago

The only way to leave all the coal buried in the ground forever is to develop a clean. less expensive alternative. We are nowhere near that point.

Until then, the President's use of EPA to increase the cost of coal generation will only serve to increase the cost of electricity for nothing in return.

Coal we refuse to burn will be exported the China, India, and elsewhere to be burned without any environmental controls and will aggravate the problem.

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**James Conca**, Contributor 6 days ago

Author

That's my fear, yes. It's also why we must expand nuclear, not the old GenII plants like Fukushima, but the new GenIIIs and IVs that can't melt down when power goes out.

✓ Called-out comment

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**buzzbelleville** 5 days ago

The NRC has put out a call for small modular nuclear designs to approve.

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**Stephen Kennedy** 6 days ago

James, what do you believe are the real costs of fracked gas, given the rapid depletion rates seen so far?

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**James Conca**, Contributor 6 days ago

Author

The costs are pretty low and the reserves so large that we are now seeing a drop-off in production because we caused a glut and the price is too low to sustain this level of production. But it will equilibrate, the cost will rise to about \$6 or \$8 an MCF, enough to make a nice profit without causing gluts. It really depends upon increasing the infrastructure such as pipelines and terminals, which will happen. The long-term also depends on what environmental and drilling regulations get put in place.

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**daniel.taccarello** 6 days ago



What's wrong with Obama's energy policy ? He really believes green technologies will replace hydrocarbons one day soon. If not nuclear as well. Idealistically we all agree but the question is how much do we push on subsidies that intrinsically can not make miracles ?

✓ Called-out comment

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**James Conca**, Contributor 6 days ago

Author

Agreed, I think the renewables' issues of construction costs and footprint are not surmountable in the foreseeable future. They need to be placed strategically, not just where they can obtain subsidies and profit.

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**Neil Levine** 6 days ago

Obama still playing favorites by having his own facts and figures. Water power still very affordable.

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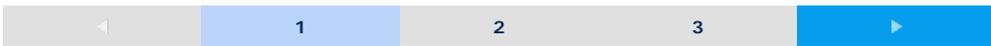
**James Conca**, Contributor 6 days ago

Author

Yes, but we've tapped out the normal hydro resources, although we have not done enough with pumped hydro storage coupled to wind. But Obama is responding to the public's supposed desire for renewables and the reality of gas.

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