

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Vice Admiral Dennis McGinn (U.S. Navy, Ret.), President & CEO, American Council on Renewable Energy

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Truth About Renewable Energy

There are a lot of folks who, for political reasons in some cases, or protecting the status quo of our energy sources, have a lot of misinformation out there about renewable energy. The myths are that it's too expensive, that it won't scale up, that it's totally dependent on government subsidy programs, and on and on and on, and all of those are faults. To that end we've established a website called EnergyFactCheck.org to help take those to a factual basis and demystify them.

Clean Energy Meets the Challenges

We have three principle challenges. One: energy security. Is it affordable? Is it available? Is it resilient? Second challenge: economic security. Can we have the kind of economic growth and create the kind of jobs that keep the country moving forward and maintain and increase our standard of living? Challenge number three: environmental security. Do we have land, air, and water quality that is going to be good for our health and well-being at the local, regional, and global levels? Renewable energy addresses all three of those challenges. It provides energy security, economic security in the form of a new industrial growth, and environmental security locally, regionally, and globally. And we call that a triple bottom line. Clean energy does all of those things. Other forms of energy do not.

Energy Security Trust

I think the President is right on the mark. I believe that establishing a trust by using some of the royalties from expanded oil and gas exploration and using it to promote renewable energy, clean energy technology, for both better, cleaner electricity production and for better transportation energy choices is right on the mark. And that's a non-partisan statement. I mean I'm fiercely independent. ACORE is fiercely independent and non-partisan; it just so happens the President has some really, really good proposals out there that I hope we can wake up and recognize that energy is an American issue; it's not a republican or democratic issue.

Unless something is right in front of us, we take so much for granted. We take the beautiful roads, interstate highway system for granted unless we're stuck in traffic because of a broken bridge or something like that, or a tunnel that's closed. We take the fact that you flip on the light switch and lights come on for granted, the provision of electricity. We take for granted that you can just go to your local gas station and get gas or diesel. We take for granted that you can just run down to the grocery store and get

whatever you need for food and turn on the tap and get water. The fact of the matter is, that's part of the success that we've had in the past for American infrastructure, but it doesn't necessarily—that indifference or lack of knowledge—bode well for the future because we absolutely need investment, in not only maintaining but improving the infrastructure for the delivery of all of the things that are so necessary for economic growth and our quality of life and our safety and health.

Do We Really Need More Disasters?

I think the reason American citizens aren't engaged sufficiently is that it hasn't become painful enough. I hate to say that. I do not want this country to suffer through any type of economic or natural disaster emergency to give the congress a wake-up call. We know everything we need to know right now, but I think there's a certain amount of apathy that's caused by taking things for granted, including taking for granted that partisan gridlock is part of the political infrastructure in Washington and we can't do anything about it. I reject that. We can do something about it. We need to communicate by all means available: cards, letters, internet, email, personal meetings, town halls, with our elected officials that we need them to get their acts together, to come together in a bipartisan way and to invest in the future of America. And it is an investment. It isn't something that is going to add long-term harm to the deficit and the national debt. In fact, if we do it right, it will increase our economic activity, increase our revenue, and decrease our national deficit. I know you've probably had many conversations with folks about kind of the wake-up call for many that Superstorm Sandy was especially for New York, New Jersey, and the southern New England area, and we don't have to go through Sandy after Sandy or Katrina after Katrina to wake up, to tell our elected officials we can in fact be much more resilient and we can in fact do a lot better in our infrastructure investment.

Renewable Energy Knowledge Breeds Demand

One of the big news stories that's come out of the tremendous deployment of more than doubling the amount of renewable energy in the past four years, is that people are starting to see it in their lives, in their localities, in their states and towns, in their businesses. And this familiarity gives them a real personal sense of the value proposition that renewable energy has, 'hey that's really cool. It doesn't spew out a lot of noxious fumes out of a smoke stack. It's reliable. It's affordable.' All of the myths go away when people actually are exposed to renewable energy. And I think that it's not happening fast enough, but my sense is that it's going to accelerate as this familiarity takes place. It's almost what I would call a virtual cycle where the more renewable energy knowledge people have because of direct exposure to their lives, the more they're going to demand it. The more they demand it, the economy of scales start kicking in. Prices continue to come down, and they've already come down dramatically over the past few years and it spurs further demand. The old question used to be, and in too many people's minds it still exists, the old wrong question was: do you want your energy cheap and dirty or clean and expensive? The question is really: do you want

your energy clean or dirty, because renewable energy increasingly is delivering more and more clean, affordable, reliable energy.

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