



Paul Andersen: Fair Game

Heated chocolate fountains and renewable energy mitigation

APRIL, 18 2011

PAUL ANDERSEN

THE ASPEN TIMES

ASPEN CO COLORADO

Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland joked last week that a homeowner wanting to install a “heated chocolate fountain” might think twice about it because of the city’s REMP program. REMP (Renewable Energy Mitigation Plan) requires energy gluttons to either install on-site mitigation or pay fees that support grants for energy conservation.

I have solar panels on my roof that came from a REMP grant. Those panels make hot water for my house, save on propane, and reduce my carbon footprint. I have yet to try a heated chocolate fountain, but on sunny days my panels could melt a thousand Dove bars.

I’m grateful to the REMP program for putting those panels on my roof, and I’m especially happy to take money from wasteful energy hogs in a kind of Robin Hood scenario that takes from the rich and gives to the poor.

My next move was to purchase photovoltaic panels that could produce enough electricity to offset my entire home. I don’t have the roof space for more panels, however, and the cost is prohibitive, so instead I bought wind energy from Holy Cross. Wind and sun have been powering a portion of my home for 10 years.

For an energy miser like me who tracks every kilowatt hour, every lumen, and every BTU, that still wasn’t enough. My goal of reducing my home to zero-emissions has proved quite a challenge.

Last summer, I learned that Paul Spencer’s Clean Energy Collective (CEC) was planning to scale up solar farms and was looking for subscribers like me. I researched their program, crunched the numbers, took a deep breath, and signed up for enough solar capacity to power my entire home. This is no small investment, but it feels right and makes ultimate economic sense by locking me into a discounted electric rate for up to 50 years. In the long run, I’ll save money and leave the legacy of a small carbon footprint.

When the sun shines, my personal solar panels at the Garfield County Airport will channel current into the Holy Cross grid and credit my energy bill. This is the most efficient means for me to declare energy independence from fossil fuels.

Now it’s Aspen and Pitkin County’s turn to decide if off-site solar arrays should serve the mitigation requirements of the REMP program. I strongly suggest they do, and here’s why.

Collective solar farms, like those developed by CEC, cost less and are more efficient than smaller, less optimal, on-site solar applications. Going off-site with REMP could potentially serve more people, lower energy costs, and reward a deserving entrepreneur who provides smart energy for our valley. REMP fees will decrease, but that’s worth it if the bottom line of carbon reduction is met through solar collectives, all of which dovetails with the city’s Canary Initiative.

Levering REMP as a punitive disincentive for wasteful energy users through on-site remedies and high fees is dubious at best because people with money and entitlement issues seem eager to continue wasting energy no matter what fees are levied. If REMP is going to offset wasteful lifestyles, it might as well do so efficiently.

The more solar panels CEC installs, the more solar will be available to all subscribers. Perhaps CEC could structure higher rates for REMP mitigation and use the surplus to discount qualifying, low-income REMP recipients. As for educational programs sponsored with REMP funds, student field trips to solar arrays where alternative energy is there for the viewing could prove optimal.

A huge solar array currently proposed by CEC for El Jebel should be installed, but with sensitivity. If the panels are considered a visual problem, they will be nowhere as bad as the eyesore across the highway called Willits. Solar panels would help offset this construction blight, at least for me.

Something has to shift in our national energy picture that makes energy a local issue rather than always exporting dirty energy impacts elsewhere. Solar, coupled with energy efficiency, could avert environmental debacles by reducing the need for new power generation. If CEC can successfully wean us off fossil fuels while localizing energy sources, its model should be replicated.

REMP is an important and visionary program, and it needs flexibility to ensure that functional efficiency, not punitive disincentives, are at the heart of a sound, enduring energy policy. Ideally, REMF will eventually be phased out anyway as more enlightened Aspen consumers comprehend the real costs of energy and awaken from dreams of heated chocolate fountains.

Paul Andersen's column appears Mondays in The Aspen Times.

<http://www.aspentimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20110418/COLUMN/110419876&parentprofile=search&template=printart>