

Pickens' Picks by Dan Jacoby

For several weeks, oil magnate T. Boone Pickens has been running commercials, talking about the benefits of wind power. He presents himself as an oil man who has "seen the light," and is now working for the good of America against his own personal best interests.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let's start with the claims he makes that are absolutely true. He says we use 25% of the world's oil, but have only 3% of the world's oil reserves. That's true. He also says that "we can't drill our way out of" our energy problems. That's also true. His claim that oil production has peaked and has been dropping for the past three years is, if not completely accurate, certainly close enough to the truth.

The first problem is that his solution fails to mention the problems with wind power. For example, he never mentions how he will get the power from the windmills he proposes to build in the middle of nowhere to the cities and towns where the power will be used. Building and maintaining transmission lines is not only expensive, but also politically difficult. Many people don't want high-voltage power lines running through their areas.

Nor does he mention one major problem with his next step – using the natural gas not needed to generate electricity that his wind power will create to power automobiles. He says, quite rightly, that compressed natural gas (CNG) is cheaper than gasoline when used in cars and trucks. But he doesn't mention that CNG-powered cars cost a lot more than gasoline-powered cars, nor does he mention that the lower price of CNG doesn't make up for the higher initial cost of the car.

It's a safe bet that Pickens has major interests in natural gas. It's another safe bet that he plans to make a lot of money from the wind farms he wants to build and the high-voltage transmission lines he wants to lay across the plains.

Pickens also fails to mention the one item that could be the single greatest measure to lower our dependence on foreign oil, save American consumers the most money, and reduce our effect on global warming. He fails to talk about energy efficiency measures.

We waste an awful lot of energy. By cutting down on that waste, we can make the greatest strides toward energy independence, and the national security that comes from not sending our money to OPEC countries that support terrorism. Some examples:

- In New York City, the mayor recently signed a bill that would prohibit large retail stores from propping open their doors while running their air conditioners. While it was a step in the right direction, this bill was merely the first step on a thousand mile journey to true energy efficiency. Smaller businesses are exempt, as are restaurants that open up entire walls, wasting enormous amounts of energy.
- Many cities and states are considering banning the sale of new incandescent light bulbs. Compact fluorescent bulbs will save a lot of energy and lower our electric bills. Soon, when the technology is finally ready for mass production, "light emitting diode" (LED) bulbs will do even better.

- Building codes, for homes, offices and factories, can be updated to require greater energy efficiency, first for new buildings, and after that for currently existing buildings. Large office buildings with centralized air conditioning systems, for instance, cause office workers tremendous discomfort, as the offices are too cold in the heat of summer. Decentralized systems not only save energy and money, but also make workers far more comfortable. Most houses in our country have gaping holes in the walls, caused by lazy builders, that waste enormous amounts of energy. Requiring inspections of all homes would cost very little, and would result in most homeowners saving a lot of money on heating and cooling costs.
- Mileage standards for cars and trucks, based on hybrid technology that is already on the market, should be put into place now, for the soonest model year possible. There is no reason not to require that every car and truck sold in America have the technology to save hundreds of millions of gallons of gasoline every year.
- While Mr. Pickens is laying all those high-voltage power transmission lines, perhaps he could also lay a few miles of high-speed railroad track. A nationwide, fully integrated high-speed rail system, suitable for both passenger and freight rail, would result in another tremendous drop in oil use. People could use trains instead of cars or, in many cases, airplanes, costing less in terms of time, money, effort and oil. Similarly, freight carried by rail costs far less, in both money and energy, than freight carried by truck.

These are just a few ideas that could begin the discussion of making America energy independent. There is no serious disagreement with the statement that this is not only an economic issue and an environmental issue, but also a national security issue.