

Wyoming boasts half of the earth's geothermal ("earth-heat") features. Many areas within the state contain geothermal reservoirs that could be harnessed to generate electricity. Yet of the 77 geothermal power plants that comprise the fourth-largest source of renewable electricity in the U.S., none is located in Wyoming.

Different types of geothermal heat pumps can provide heating and cooling for residential and commercial buildings. These need not be located within "hot spots," but such pumps are best considered ahead of new construction. Governments that encourage responsible energy consumption—Germany is one—make sure that this alternative is financially competitive with fossil-fuel-derived energy.

Wyomingites don't hear about these possibilities except through Cooperative Extension Service of University of Wyoming, where Milton Geiger has put together a pamphlet on geothermal heat pumps. By contrast, UW's School of Energy Resources (SER) features high-profile research and conferences for coal, oil, and gas. SER's governing body—"made up mostly of fossil fuel executives," as Dustin Bleizeffer observed—fosters the idea that our nation's thirst for energy mandates the school's focus.

Indy Burke is a Wyoming Excellence Chair at UW. A Renewable Resources faculty in the College of Agriculture, she is also the director of UW's Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources. Haub "advances the understanding and resolution of complex environmental and natural resource challenges," says its mission statement. A generous endowment from Helga and Erivan Haub, matched by legislative funding, ensures the school's comfy continuance.

The Haub family owns a ranch in Sublette County, and it has made sustainability a top concern. Its vision for the school is "to further environmental education . . . and help decision making in local and state governments."

The school supports the Ruckelshaus Institute, named after the stalwart first administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency who also founded the school's board of directors. Inasmuch as the leadership of William Ruckelshaus has guided the institute, "we produce neutral scientific, technical, and socioeconomic analysis on natural resource issues."

Neutral analysis? Ruckelshaus co-sponsored the September 2011 hydraulic fracturing symposium, chaired by Professor Burke. When, in this space, I cast a critical eye on the conference, she was displeased enough to email the editor, charging, among other things, that I should have identified myself as journalist when I signed up. (Inasmuch as its research is largely financed through legislative allotment, SER conferences are open to the public.)

I'm not a journalist. I'm a retired language professor who writes an opinion column, I emailed Ms. Burke.

Are Haub's and SER's goals becoming interchangeable? Why did Ruckelshaus co-sponsor a conference that's a bullhorn for the fossil-fuel industry? "SER promotes pollution" and "Fracking—No Way!" read posters mounted on trucks, presumably by students, near Laramie's Hilton Garden Inn where the conference unfolded. Juxtaposed are Haub / Ruckelshaus brochures depicting students trekking up mountains, wading in rivers, collecting pollen in alpine meadows.

Rob Hurless is deputy director of SER's Carbon Management Institute. He is also Governor Mead's energy advisor. Does he advise the Governor to include renewables in Wyoming's energy portfolio? Does SER examine geothermal energy and hold conferences about it? Hardly. SER makes sure its interests are maintained through legislative giveaways and gubernatorial energy decisions that benefit the fossil-fuel industry.

New York State has a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing. The industry is determined to change that. "Halliburton and Exxon are massing at the border," observes New York writer Sandra Steingraber, who goes on to quote an industry rep to a reporter: "The shale army has arrived. Resistance is futile."

Tim Considine is a SER professor of economics who has worked for the American Petroleum Institute and the Wyoming Mining Association. He has testified to the U.S. House of Representatives on the economic importance of coal and gas and was a panelist at a 2010 New York, NY, symposium on "Natural Gas Development in New York State." He is lead author of a report that was issued by a newbe institute founded by SUNY (State University of New York) at Buffalo.

The report identifies Mr. Considine by his title at University of Wyoming but doesn't disclose his prior work for industry groups. When a group of 83 professors and staff began to inquire into the founding and funding of "Shale Resources and Society," SUNY at Buffalo shut down its fledgling institute.

Professor Considine also co-wrote a Penn State University study on fracking funded by the industry group Marcellus Shale Coalition. The study, begun in 2009, was canceled in 2012: faculty balked until the project was off the table.

Mr. Considine explained the message of his industry-friendly papers: "[S]hale gas drilling, hydraulic fracturing in particular, can be regulated so that it doesn't pose any significant risk for the public and the environment." If the industry knows of safe practices, why doesn't it implement them?

In fracking, millions of gallons of chemically-treated water and sand are forced underground to break shale rock and free trapped gas or petroleum. The technology has lowered energy prices, yet fracking has been linked to groundwater contamination and high ozone levels. For people living close to fracked wells, it has meant headaches, sore throats, and difficulty breathing. Horrendous health problems have been ubiquitous (yet unaddressed by industry) after blow-outs of gas wells near Clark (2006) and Douglas

(2012). Burying wastewater from drilling has been linked to earthquakes. The practice guzzles volumes of water that drought-stricken states can ill afford to yield.

Mr. Geiger emailed me that his position as energy extension coordinator, for which he obtains funding from the School of Energy Resources, allows him to “focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and the community impacts of large-scale energy development.” He adds: “Through joint involvement in my position, Extension and SER affirm their commitment to providing research-based, unbiased information to Wyoming residents about renewables and efficiency.”

Nicely said, but action speaks louder than words. A follow-up column will delve further into Mr. Geiger’s efforts.

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