

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 in the U.S. (the fourth largest source of renewable electricity) none is 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 integrated in the planning stages of construction. Governments that encourage responsible energy consumption—Germany is one—ensure 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 Milt Geiger has put together a pamphlet on geothermal heat pumps. By contrast, UW's School of Energy Resources (SER) features coal, oil, and gas in high-profile research and attendant conferences. 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 on these fuels.

Indy Burke is Wyoming Excellence Chair at UW. A botany faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences, and Renewable Resources 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 in 2004, matched by legislative funding, ensures the school's comfy continuance.

The Haub family owns a ranch in Sublette County, where 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 sends out brochures that feature students trekking up mountains, wading in rivers, collecting pollen in alpine meadows. Haub 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. The leadership of William Ruckelshaus has guided the Institute on environmental and natural resources; hence ". . . we produce neutral scientific, technical, and socioeconomic analysis on natural resource issues."

Professor Burke chaired last year's (Sept 2011) hydraulic fracturing symposium on behalf of SER and Ruckelshaus. When, in this space, I cast a critical eye on the conference, she was displeased enough to fire off a letter to the editor charging, among other things, that I should have identified myself as journalist when I signed up. (SER venues are open to the public, for the research presented there is largely financed through legislative allotment.)

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

Why did Ruckelshaus co-sponsor a conference that's a bullhorn for the fossil-fuel industry? Are Haub's and SER's goals becoming interchangeable? "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 mission statements and their brochures depicting the wholesome student life.

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 research geothermal energy and hold conferences about it?

Milt Geiger in response to my questions emailed 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 that "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."

Well said, but actions speak louder than words.

Tim Considine is a SER professor of economics who has worked for the American Petroleum Institute and the Wyoming Mining Association. He is lead author of a report that was issued by a newbie 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.

New York State has a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing, and the industry is doing its best 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."

When a group of 83 professors and staff began to inquire into the founding and funding of the Shale Resources and Society Institute, SUNY at Buffalo shut down its fledgling institute.

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

Mr. Considine explained the message of his industry-touting papers thus: “[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.” Well, 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 and created jobs, but 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. Burying wastewater from drilling has been linked to earthquakes. The practice guzzles volumes of water that drought-stricken states can ill afford to yield.

SER does more than “promote pollution.” Its mercenary interests are maintained through legislative giveaways and gubernatorial energy decisions that benefit the fossil-fuel industry. A follow-up column will focus on Mr. Geiger’s input.