

Is It Too Late? Living with a World Energy Crisis

By Craig Shields, Editor, 2GreenEnergy.com

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2GreenEnergy provides research and professional services to Renewable Energy businesses. Craig Shields is the author of a #1 "Energy" Best-Seller on Amazon: RENEWABLE ENERGY - FACTS AND FANTASIES.

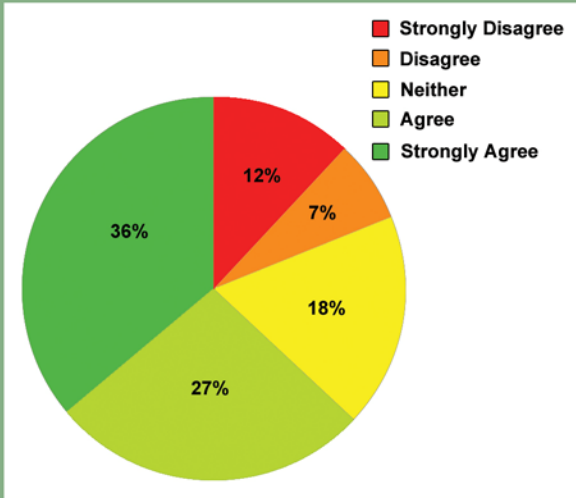
Here we present another in our series of free reports based on the surveys we conduct of the visitors to our site. The following is a summary of the results of 300+ participants to our June 2011 survey, which dealt with one central issue:

Will population growth and energy resource depletion have dire consequences over the coming years?

The main results are presented in the charts below.

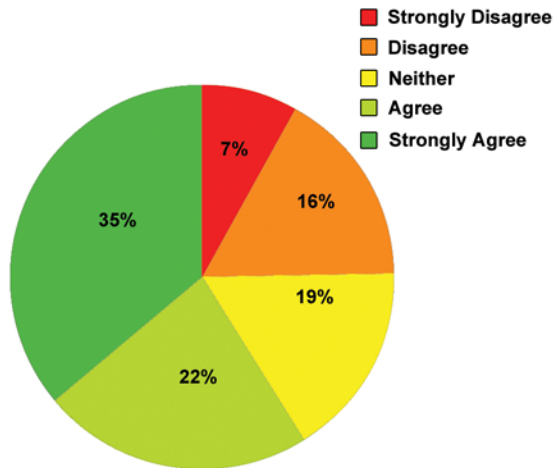
A)

Among the biggest problems will be the affordability and availability of food, as commodity prices soar.



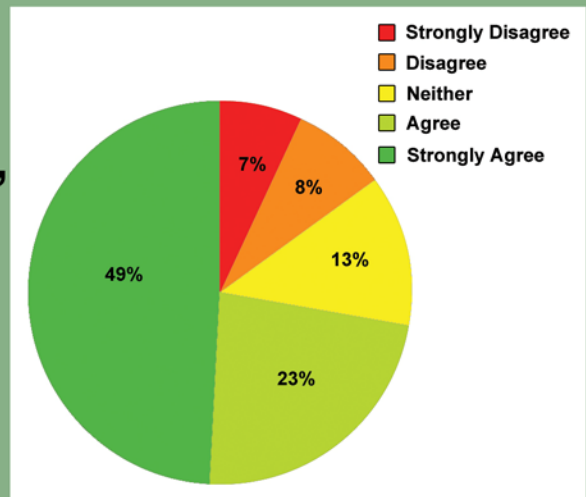
B)

Global climate change will have obvious disastrous effects on the Earth's habitability by 2030.



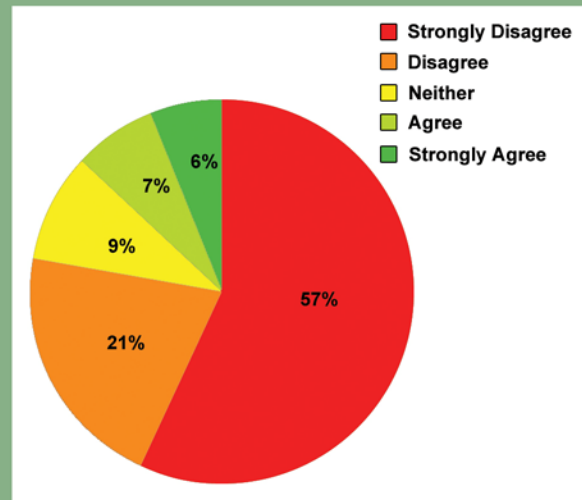
C)

We're past the peak of oil production, thus prices can only rise as demand outstrips supply.



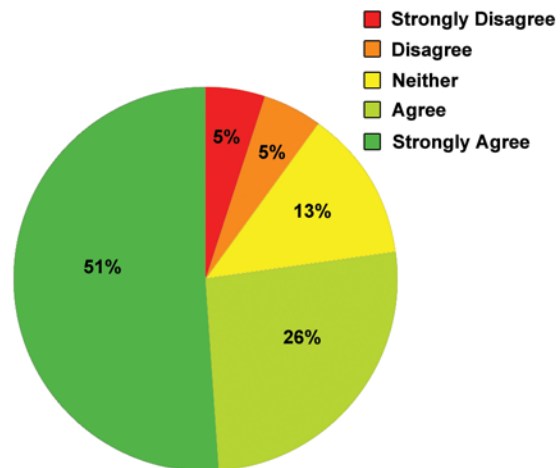
D)

Renewable energy cannot be developed with sufficient quantities to make a meaningful difference in all this.



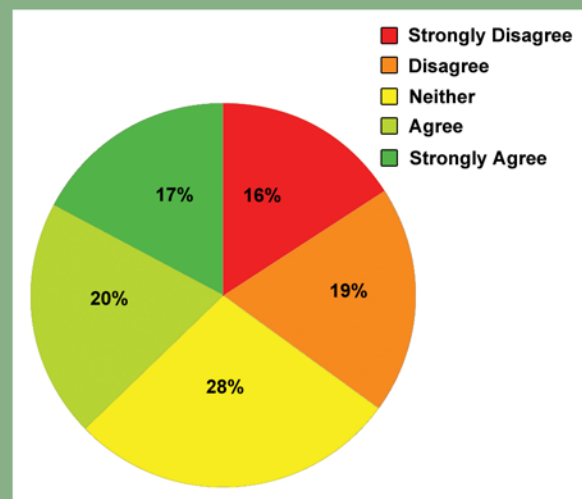
E)

Some of the newer technologies in renewable energy hold great promise to make a meaningful difference.



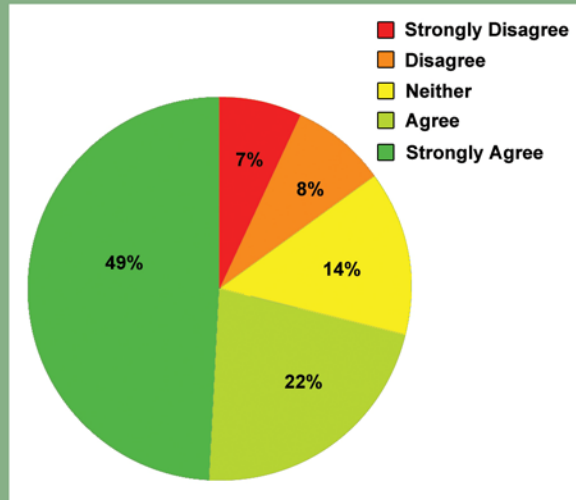
F)

There is a reasonable chance that currently unproven developments in physics, e.g., cold fusion, will make a significant change in our energy picture.



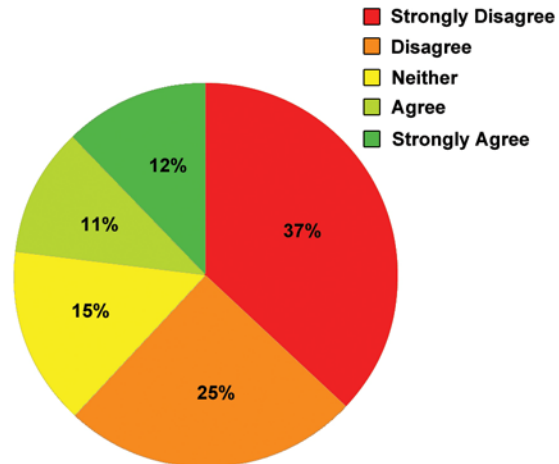
G)

Governments that print money whenever they wish have compounded the problem; the skyrocketing public debt in the US has created a huge problem that will affect all Americans severely.



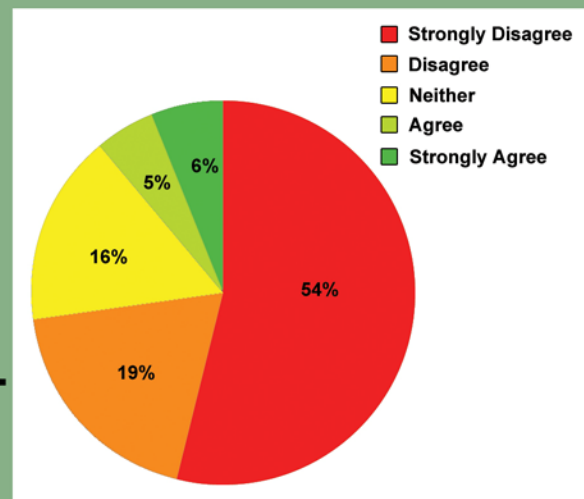
H)

We have more pressing problems to solve right now, versus concerning ourselves with what 2030 may look like.



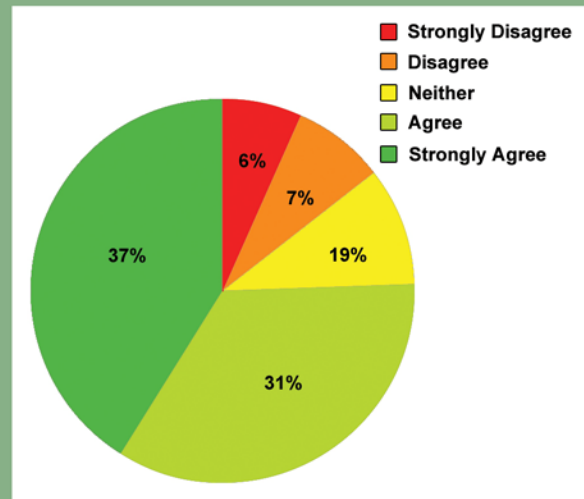
I)

All this is malarkey perpetuated by alarmists and political radicals. At most, the concerns are over-hyped.



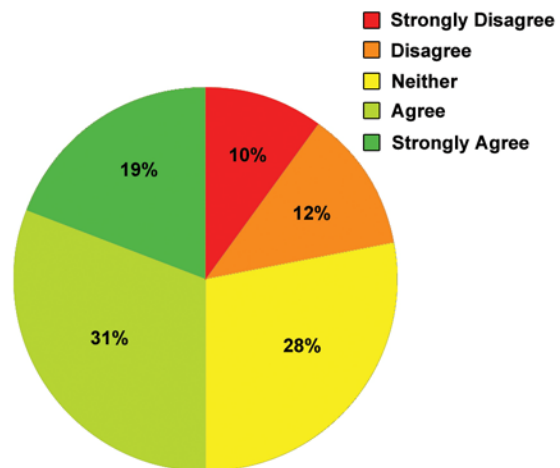
J)

These are important problems, but avoidable if we act now.



K)

Overall, I'm optimistic for a good outcome here.



L)

Participants were also given the opportunity to provide their overall response to these issues on an unprompted, open-ended basis, which can be summarized as follows:

| Response | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| I'm optimistic; I think we can innovate, instill stewardship, etc. We've always found a way to deal with our problems in the past; | 37% |
| I'm pessimistic; I foresee a painful future; a reduction in the population; | 24% |
| It's a tough challenge; we'll have to make sacrifices and change our lifestyles | 57% |
| We need government leaders who can break their corrupt ties with the energy industry, and honestly push for solutions that favor the people. | 39% |

Analysis

As shown in the charts above, there are a number of fundamentally different forecasts as to the quality of the future we face, at least to the degree that it is a result of the way we deal with the need to provide energy to a growing population. The majority of those interviewed agree that the growing scarcity of food commodities will have disastrous effects on large portions of the population, and that “peak oil” will eventually result in rising prices of transportation fuels.

Only 19% disagree with the proposition that climate change will have disastrous consequences by 2030. However, 62% agree that we have more pressing problems right now than worrying about what 2030 will look like in terms of energy use, climate change, etc.

While some will find this alarming, it's hardly unexpected. Even the man who is accredited with the discovery of global warming (V. Ramanathan of Scripps Institute, who, in 1972, correctly predicted a measurable increase in the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere by 1980) understands the lack of concern. “People have a finite capacity for dealing with disaster,” he told me in an interview. “When things are blowing up all around them right now, it is a sad truth that the majority of people are unable to process the gravity of a situation that will cause vast destruction decades hence.”

While 73% disagree that these issues are perpetrated by environmentalist radicals, this leaves a healthy 27% of the respondent base holding the belief that there is at least some level of truth to the notion (6% strongly agree).

77% disagree with the notion that renewable energy will arrive too late to make a meaningful difference in the outcome to the health and safety of the world's population, and an equivalent number see great promise in evolving clean energy technologies.

68% of survey participants agree that these problems generally are avoidable if we act now, and 50% agree that they're optimistic for a good outcome.

Reviewing the pie charts as well as the tabulation of the open-ended responses, I see an interesting blend of feelings, beliefs, and concerns.

Optimism – Especially If We Act Now




The first major opinion expressed is a sense of overall optimism, based on the belief that mankind has always been successful in dealing with the crises it's faced in the past, and the concept that the future can logically be expected to look essentially like the past.

Several mentioned market supply and demand conditions, Malthusian economics, and similar concepts that act as invisible but powerful forces that put natural constraints on the overuse of resources, and bring forward innovation solutions.

Others expressing optimism base their beliefs on the notion that the economics of clean energy will ultimately become quite attractive vis-à-vis fossil fuels, as the latter will become scarce and thus expensive. Some invoked "Moore's Law" (which suggests that technology improves in effectiveness on an exponential basis over time) as the rationale that may lie behind this.

Another idea on which some people pin their expectations for a positive outcome to the energy/population picture is the notion that the human species can learn to take better care of one another, and the planet we call home. This, of course, runs counter to the idea expressed above (that the future will look like the past), and calls for a future in which humankind shows a dramatic and abrupt change, demonstrating unprecedented levels of kinship and enlightenment.

Here are a few quotes from respondents that support these viewpoints:

-  I believe mankind has the ability to adjust to the situation. There are still untapped sources of energy that can be utilized for future generations. Man will find ways to remedy the problems on hand and find solutions if needed.
-  We can't change the world over night but given a little more help maybe we could give it a chance at survival.
-  Although the numbers are against us in global population growth, I do believe we can still make a difference. If we can instill in each and every generation to be better stewards of the Earth than the generation before, then we have a great shot at turning things around, albeit slowly. Having a child has helped instill the philosophy in me that we must act now and make this world better for future generations.

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- (With) renewables, long-term costs will drop and keep dropping. That's good for the economy, that's good for the habitable biosphere, so that's got to be good for people. Eradication of poverty and stemming resource depletion will occur as a result of near to zero running costs.
- The solutions are available if we, as a nation (and world), are honest with ourselves. We must have the strength to face reality and the courage to do the right thing.
- We need to shift our focus from what is in the ground to what is happening above the ground. Every one of us has the ability to produce our own power we just need the tools and incentive to do so.
- Malthusian theory in Economics has proved right in my lifetime that food supply shall be taken care of by the demands. Returning to India, my home country after over 25 years of service abroad I see food supply in abundance.
- I am of the opinion that fossil fuel days are at their end; science is on the job and I am confident we shall solve the problem in due course if we can correctly define it.
- People don't realize that the size of our renewable resources are truly enormous. If we industrialize using renewable, sustainable and green ways, we can make our existence on the planet a pleasurable one. Industrialized nations typically have sharply falling populations as opposed to third world nations that typically have exploding populations.
- Just look at WWII. In the history of mankind, when the pressure for a solution gets dire enough, innovation and public drive come to mankind's salvation. In the garages and dorm rooms of America, (including mine) those solutions to energy and food are being developed.
- Keep your chin up ~ there is hope for our future.
- Renewable energy is mostly a job creator in every country, a clean source of energy, and most importantly: the wealth stays home, contributing taxes, jobs, wealth, development, and pride.

- Market forces are already at work, and quickly transforming our world.
- Most of our predictions tend to be based in linear estimations. But actually, oil price is already exerting a lot of pressure on development of alternatives to current internal combustion engine vehicles.

Pessimism – Including Starvation, Given the Harsh Realities

Many survey participants see a “crash landing” for human civilization, for a variety of interrelated reasons. First, several respondents note that people will not act in ways that fail to further their own self-interest, and will not make the lifestyle changes required to deal with this crisis effectively. Others note that civilization will have to face incredible suffering before any action is taken to avert the catastrophe.

As the reader will note in the quotes here, several spoke along the lines of the late George Carlin, when he said (and I paraphrase): Save the Earth? Don't worry about the Earth; worry about humankind. This planet will do just fine, long after it's completed the process of expelling us human inhabitants, who have so clearly proven our unworthiness to live here. Just like a landlord that evicts tenants who don't pay their rent, or a dog that shakes off its parasites, the Earth, with its droughts, famines, climate changes, and dread diseases, is well on its way to ushering us off to extinction.

A few pointed to what could be called a cruel pragmatism: the coming crisis will greatly reduce the world's population. But the survivors will be the wealthiest, who own and control a grossly disproportionate share of the world's resources, and will continue to live in comfort – perhaps even greater comfort – after the “adjustment” is made.

Again, quotes from respondents:

- The problem is not the lack of new technical solutions. The problem is the powerful forces that do not want new cheap energy and environmental solutions. Incompetent politicians let themselves be ruled by the lobbies, which are well paid in order to maintain control over future development.
- My question is whether people will ultimately decide to act in the interest of the planet and future generations without having to be coerced. My feeling is that the answer is no, and for that reason, I am not optimistic about the long-term future of humanity. Big brains may turn out to be an evolutionary failure.

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Humans will experience population crash due to our shortsightedness. If we are careful, it need not lead to the demise of humans as a species but rather a “wake up call” to reform our economies and technologies to be more respectful of reality. We’ve been living a fantasy that we control everything and nothing can get in our way. That has to stop.

No doubt that reality of present day population growth versus use and abuse of resources will continue and get worse in years to come. On the other hand we as a race are on the edge of accepting that things must change in order to survive. If education, research, development, along with the proper allocation of funding does not go in the right direction, nature itself will (as it appears to be starting) rectify all aspects of our existence from overpopulation to pollution and resource extraction.

“Big Money” as usual still has too big a hand in the mix of things which may compromise everybody in the long run for the economic benefit of just a few. When will the public in general, wake up and demand that either governments intervene, or the public take the reins away from this concentrated few and go forward to benefit the whole of mankind?

When will we wake up and make the demands on governments and science to do the “right thing”?


As a nation we will do nothing until it reaches catastrophic proportion.


I have serious doubts given the political atmosphere driven by our oligarchic special interest groups that have persuaded the masses to succumb to the political strategies of the rulers which favor business as usual.


Climate change is altering insect and disease patterns, weather patterns, and many people across the planet are simply in a state of denial, much akin to the Titanic debacle. The crisis is here. Politics seems to trump science, thus I see no real solutions in the near future, as we get close to the tipping point of human extinction; after all, Nature does not need us !


The writing is on the wall, and we have to find a way to avert the ‘tragedy of the commons.’ I think the planet itself has a bright future, it will spin around the sun for millions if not billions more years. But survival of humans in the sort of numbers we now have in the world? I doubt it.


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 I see the price of energy rising, resulting in rising food costs and probably declining food production. The result of this will be terrible levels of human misery and possibly mass starvation, resulting in population reduction.

 The wild-card for me is climate change, and whether the concentration of CO2 in the air will bring physical disasters before the dwindling supplies bring further economic disaster.

 I think that the necessary changes will be delayed to the point that much of humanity will be forced to endure catastrophic consequences.

 It is the unpredictability of the future that is most difficult for humans to accept. In the end I fear that human life is fragile and so some future scenarios could result in massive, uncontrolled and catastrophic population decline.

 I just feel a little sorry for the majority of our species over the next 100 years as we have already almost certainly overshot our sustainable population levels at current quality of life/lifestyle choice. Fingers crossed I'm wrong.

 It seems that the more we exploit the environment the closer we come toward some sort of pandemic; if we are unsuccessful in attaining some form of renewable energy program as a nation and development is slowed by indecision on the government level we may see the population reduced anyway.

Government

A great number of people express neither optimism nor pessimism, but simply articulate what they see as the most important challenge standing in the way of our success. Principal among these is government, its unholy alliance with Big Money, and skepticism that our leaders can ever honestly confront the problems that the people elect them to solve.

Quotes from respondents include:

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- Government and big business (make) progress slow. Big business purchases research to protect their investments, not to advance the research. Government controls the dollar to suit re-election thus protecting their continued survival, not the public's survival.
- We need a huge push for alternative energy now! The government should lead the way with solar panels on all government buildings and hybrid/ electric fleets. That would create many thousands of jobs and dramatically lessen our dependence on foreign oil.
- There are many profiteering companies and industries who are making obscene profits but not with good solutions for our world. Like the pirates of 200 years ago they need to be put out of business.
- The global situation has been compared to WW II as far as threatening humanity as we know it. A solution has been suggested using WWII tactics to ramp up industry with the several sustainable options: solar, wind and geothermal. This is in my opinion at this time a very possible path to minimize what most scientists believe is a dire future for most of life on Earth if we do not pursue them.
- With sufficient funding for research and development, and removing subsidies for oil and coal, great progress can be made
- Take away the pull of moneyed interests (read: oil companies, for example) and we can get common sense rules and research.
- Maybe once we have pulled our heads out of the sand and see what is going on all around us we will stop believing what the big oil corporations are telling (selling) us.
- If the United States spent there money on renewable energy instead of the Iraqi war, the whole problem would now have been history! But that's an if-story ...
- I agree that the problem of energy availability is getting worse by the minute, and the politicians compound the problem with their selfish view.

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As the saying goes; “The stone age did not end because we ran out of stones!” the same applies to hydrocarbons. I am confident we will replace it with a bunch of alternative sources – but it’s clear the US will not be at the forefront of many of these as we allow the hydrocarbon special interests to control policy.

Many stressed the immediacy of the crisis, i.e., “It’s not about 2030, it’s about now.” A few added onto this various notes, e.g., that we should focus on a few technologies that make sense, rather than broad-shooting across a number of technologies some of which clearly hold no promise.

Several likened this to our response to the existential threat of World War II, which we met with a shoulder-to-shoulder effort that confronted the gravity of the crisis and the enormity of the challenge we faced in overcoming it. A few also pointed out of the need to change our lifestyles:



It’s time to start cutting our losses and luxury.



It really is not about population growth. We are so deeply entrenched in a consumerist society, we often are not aware of the consequences – we need society and lifestyle changes to carry us into the future or we are truly doomed. We will destroy this planet if we do not become aware of what we are doing, the way we are depleting its natural resources. The lifestyle changes can begin right now.

Conclusion

One might think that optimists and pessimists would have essentially nothing in common with respect to their viewpoints on our future, to the degree that this success is a function of our energy policy. Yet the precise opposite is true. The vast majority of respondents, regardless of the degree to which they carry hope for the future of mankind, see the need for sweeping and immediate change in the way we deal with the migration to renewables. They see an urgent need to act now, developing a trustworthy and effective response to the crisis by government leaders.

Reading through the responses, one is overwhelmed with the passion with which the subject is regarded: the hopes, the despair, and a great deal of anger. As Dr. Jason Scorse, university professor in the economics department at the Monterey Institute of International Studies told me recently, “I don’t throw around the word ‘evil’ lightly. But when I realized that there are a few super-powerful multi-billionaires who have hijacked

the truth and are using complete fabrications to drive our federal energy policy so that they can make a few extra billion dollars at the expense of the health and safety of all of us living here – now and in the future, I really can't think of another word for it.”

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Craig Shields, the site's editor, is the author of [Renewable Energy — Facts and Fantasies](#), published by Clean Energy Press, 2010.