

Guest Editorial

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PUBLIC ENERGY EDUCATION: IS IT WORTH IT? AND WHOSE JOB IS IT ANYWAY?

These questions do not have obvious answers. If they did, either we would see a well-coordinated, broad-based, balanced, international educational effort, or we would stop wasting money on the hundreds of very good but narrow programs that currently exist.

Before these questions are addressed, I should define what I believe should be the contents of a public energy education program. The Energy Literacy Project believes that a good program should link energy (BTUs in any form, including conservation and energy efficiency), the economy (the role energy plays in our economic well-being), and the environment (the economic impact of the use of energy on our quality of life). It is the prerequisite course that the public must understand before it can make informed decisions regarding coal, oil, gas, hydro, wind, renewables, or nuclear, no less the merits of auto fuel efficiency standards or drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Specifically, the message must address pocketbook issues to get the public's attention; then the gee-whiz of science, engineering, and technology will have meaning.

In addition, we must recognize that the messenger is just as important as the message. Therefore, any public energy education program must come from a very credible delivery system. In a recent survey conducted by *The Wall Street Journal*, the American people distrusted the oil industry (74%) more than any other institution except for Catholic bishops (89%). When the industry asks why there is no sympathy when prices cycle to record lows, it only has to remember the words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

With the exception of very few periods, the industry has delivered cheap and abundant energy to the public, and that is taken for granted. So is there any need for public energy education at all?

It is our opinion that an informed public would lead to a stable and sustainable energy policy. Regardless of whether such a policy is pro-conservation or pro-development, the public would not tolerate volatility in this policy. Therefore, taxation, regulation, environmental restriction, etc., would be known and predictable. With uncertainties in these areas removed, the price premium the industry demands would no longer be needed, improving companies' bottom lines and, in a competitive industry, lowering prices to the consumer.

Such benefits from an educational program should be obvious to both the industry and to government. It is a part of good corporate governance. In the international sense, several national oil companies have told us that an informed consumer base assures them that there is a market for their product. However, with the current level of public energy literacy, such an effort will have a very long-term payout, if such results are measurable at all.

Assuming that the value of such a program is justifiable, let us look at the second question. In a perfect world there would be consensus and financial support for a true international effort. It would be started by the energy industry with

only moral support and possibly the contribution of intellectual property from government. This would require leadership that is difficult to find in our very segmented industry. Therefore, assuming that such a program is desirable, government may have a role in the initial leadership to get such a program started.

As this column is being written, the U.S. Congress is trying to finalize the current effort at a National Energy Policy (NEP). But prospects for meaningful legislation dim by the day. If similar efforts of the past 30 years can be used as a guide, the prospects for a serious energy and energy security debate and successful action are poor.

President Bush's proposed National Energy Policy contained a recommendation: "The President shall direct the Secretary of Energy to explore potential opportunities to develop educational programs related to energy development and use. This should include possible legislation to create public education awareness programs about energy. Such programs should be funded and managed by the respective energy industries. ..." The Energy Literacy Project believes that this recommendation was placed in the proposed NEP because the president felt that an informed public is the foundation upon which any sustainable policy is built. However, this recommendation was not even considered by the Congress.

With or without government leadership, by default, the best-informed body to conduct a public energy education program is the energy industry, and painful though it may be, it is time the industry accepted this task. It will require the energy industry to make core investments on a continuing basis in broad-based, balanced educational and informational programs. No one and no group is better qualified, and the longer industry delays in accepting this responsibility, the more likely we are to relive the mistakes of the past, or worse.

So once again I must ask if the industry can accept this challenge or if this is a job for government. I believe that the SPE can aid in this debate by encouraging its members to get real answers to this question from their firms. For many years, we at the Energy Literacy Project have given talks and had articles published in SPE journals and proceedings and many other publications and venues. It has felt like preaching to the choir, just as so many others talk about the need for public energy education. Yet if this were truly the choir, the collection plate for such programs would be full. If there is no real interest in such a broad-based international program, the noble calling of educating the public about energy will surely fail. **JPT**

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