



Looking for answers, a slight cough, and thoughts on Boone's plan

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Topic: [Miscellaneous](#)

Tags: [maine](#), [natural gas](#), [t. boone pickens](#), [wind farms](#) [[list all tags](#)]

An increasing number of stories in Drumbeat, and in the world press, are focusing on the impacts of higher oil prices. Whether it is in the sacrifices that families must make to stretch their incomes to [cover costs](#), the lack of city and state funding to cover all the utility and [maintenance cost increases](#), or the rising [fuel bill](#) that the military must meet, often, particularly in national bases, from existing budgets. And even in field operations the [use of alternate approaches](#) is being considered.

The different sizes and scales of the price impact mean that, short of greatly increased supplies of oil becoming available at low cost, (as readers know an unattainable dream) alternate solutions and changes to lifestyles and practices will have to be implemented, on a growing scale as the costs of supply continue to rise. But these answers must be different in different places, and as they seek to address different scales of problem.

From time to time, and particularly in Comments, there are suggestions and reality based discussions on what individuals can do to change or help with their personal lifestyle changes. At the other extreme we debate the success, or otherwise, of national programs to address the issue, and certainly there is a need for such a debate. But there is also an intermediate level, the one where the impact of oil and natural gas cost increases is already clearly apparent, and that is at the level of local, and state government. And here, while the pain is immediate, remedial steps can either occur [quite quickly](#) or much more slowly – depending on the local government understanding of the situation.

It is also at this level that most of the decisions are made about [permitting new power plants](#). I was thinking about that, and the factors that lead to permitting decisions when I looked at the announcement about [T. Boone Pickens new wind farm program](#). The plan does not have [as immediate an impact](#) as I first understood.

T. Boone Pickens: Well, that's the first step to a 4,000-megawatt wind farm. This is 1,000 megawatts. We start receiving those turbines in mid 2010. We will have the total 4,000 megawatts finished by the end of 2015. That power will go into a transmission line that will tie into the Electric Reliability Council of Texas system in the state of Texas, and it will be transmitted downstate

I first heard him talk about the idea at the ASPO meeting last year in Houston. At that time the installation of the wind farm was intended just to help with the supply of electricity to the nation. In the latest version, however, the benefit of the farm is also directed towards the displacement of natural gas as the source of electrical power.

Natural gas use, as you may have noted, has been increasingly, over the last few years, the fuel of choice for new power stations. And the increase in demand has led to [a current increase in US production](#), although at a [significantly higher price](#). However, a significant fraction of this new production is coming from shale deposits, where the high level of demand and the [decline pattern of the wells](#) (50% drop in the first year and economic exhaustion within 4 years) means that this is really a transient resource, with drilling having to increase more and more just to keep up with existing demand, and with the likelihood of that not being possible within the next few years. This becomes germane relative to the Pickens Plan, since by the time it becomes fully effective, it is likely that natural gas will be in significantly shorter supply than it is at present.

As a result any move to change, on a significant scale, the motive fuel for the American fleet from gas and diesel to natural gas power is likely to run out of that fuel, before there has been a significant economic return on the investment. It runs the risk of becoming an alternative, like corn-based ethanol, which will have limited impact, and where its contribution will turn out to be much less than had been originally hoped.

There have been a couple of stories recently about those [seeking divine intervention](#) to lower the prices of gas. It has been mentioned that, [after prayer](#), it [did rain](#) in Georgia last year to help with the drought. But, sadly, the drought appears to be [getting worse](#). Should the drought continue, then not only will water levels possibly fall to the level that affects local power stations (they need cooling water and if the level falls below the intake level then they must shut down), but also normal drinking and domestic water supplies will come under increasing threat. This was quite a concern [last year](#) but doesn't seem to be mentioned in recent discussions. In these times I am more inclined to the thought that I think I first heard in the Alec Guinness movie [The Lavender Hill Mob](#) where it is quoted by a ruffian shoplifting a toy train in a department store, "God helps those, who help themselves!"

So what can we do to help ourselves. There will be local solutions that can be implemented faster than national ones – the [Governor in Maine](#) and New England seem to indicate a closer feel to reality than some other states have yet shown. Each region will have to look to the resources of the region to help with their local needs. The solar farms in California will not be as successful in Alaska in December, and the wind farms that may be productive where the wind blows strongly may not contribute as strongly in less windy parts of the country. (When I drove past the wind farm near Hel not all the turbines were turning). On the other hand the pellet stoves that might be a partial solution in places with significant forests, don't work too well as a significant fuel contribution in Arizona. There is considerable awareness, at the local level, of the need to find these solutions.

The problem however, T. Boone Pickens attempts to the contrary, is that most of these local solutions are not going to have much impact on the more critical need, which is for liquid fuels to drive the cars and trucks in the next few years. And while a number of small companies are now using waste cooling oil, that can only go so far. It is here, I believe, that we need to have more of a national effort. So far that effort hasn't seemed to do much for supply. Apart from playing the blame game, what are we really doing to find new sources of fuel?

The incentives for corn-based ethanol, and the encouragement of cellulosic ethanol are beginning to appear less than attractive (except to junior senators from corn growing states such as Illinois).

What then can local authorities do about the situation? Firstly they need to be aware of the problem, and so, , let me take my hat off to those ([Gail the Actuary](#) being a prime example) who are willing to go out and talk to local service clubs, council members and folk at that level. It does not get you the publicity that talking on national TV does, but often it can be more useful. Talking heads on TV don't reach the folk that run the town or city, and who have immediate problems in paying for their fuel bills, or affording asphalt for the road resurfacing program. Yet these are the folk that need to know what is coming down the pike. [Debbie Cook](#) had some [good advice \(pdf\)](#) about how to talk to folk at this level at the Cork ASPO meeting last year. But before talking to them it might be better to start with the service club programs. Program chairs for these clubs are always looking for informative talks to their membership (and it generally comes with a free meal). They are friendly groups of your neighbors and it is a good way to start spreading the word.



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