

Renewable energy

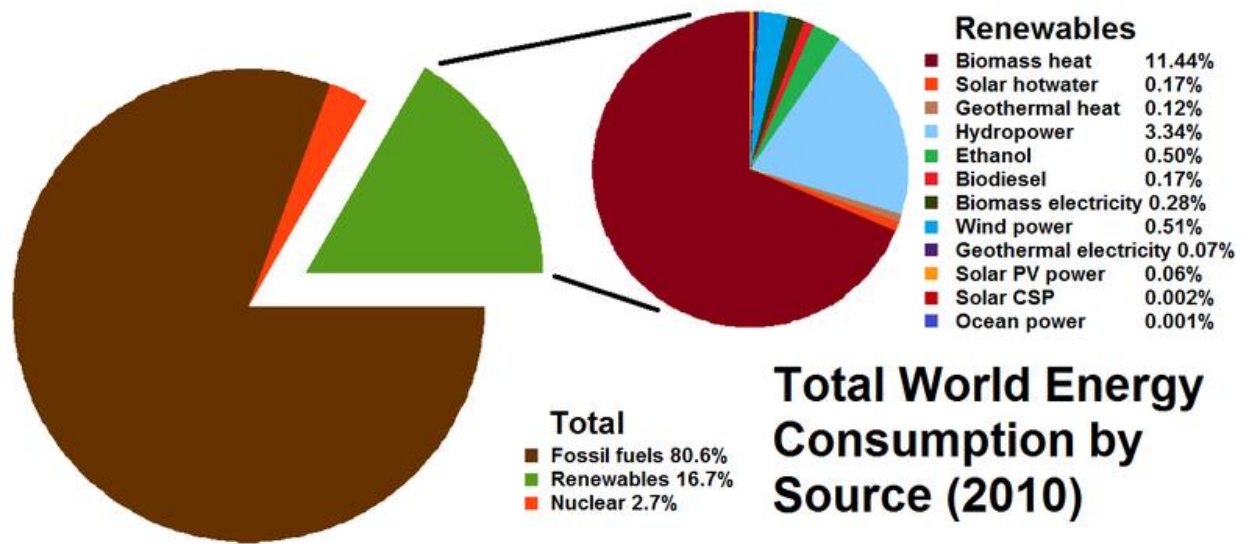
Renewable energy is generally defined as energy that comes from resources which are naturally replenished on a human timescale such as sunlight, wind, rain, tides, waves and geothermal heat. Renewable energy replaces conventional fuels in four distinct areas: electricity generation, hot water/space heating, motor fuels, and rural (off-grid) energy services.

About 16% of global final energy consumption presently comes from renewable resources, with 10% of all energy from traditional biomass, mainly used for heating, and 3.4% from hydroelectricity. New renewables (small hydro, modern biomass, wind, solar, geothermal, and biofuels) account for another 3% and are growing rapidly. At the national level, at least 30 nations around the world already have renewable energy contributing more than 20% of energy supply. National renewable energy markets are projected to continue to grow strongly in the coming decade and beyond.[6] Wind power, for example, is growing at the rate of 30% annually, with a worldwide installed capacity of 282,482 megawatts (MW) at the end of 2012.

Renewable energy resources exist over wide geographical areas, in contrast to other energy sources, which are concentrated in a limited number of countries. Rapid deployment of renewable energy and energy efficiency is resulting in significant energy security, climate change mitigation, and economic benefits. In international public opinion surveys there is strong support for promoting renewable sources such as solar power and wind power.

While many renewable energy projects are large-scale, renewable technologies are also suited to rural and remote areas and developing countries, where energy is often crucial in human development. United Nations' Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said that renewable energy has the ability to lift the poorest nations to new levels of prosperity.

Overview



Renewable energy flows involve natural phenomena such as sunlight, wind, tides, plant growth, and geothermal heat, as the International Energy Agency explains:

Renewable energy is derived from natural processes that are replenished constantly. In its various forms, it derives directly from the sun, or from heat generated deep within the earth. Included in the definition is electricity and heat generated from solar, wind, ocean, hydropower, biomass, geothermal resources, and biofuels and hydrogen derived from renewable resources.

Wind power is growing at the rate of 30% annually, with a worldwide installed capacity of 282,482 megawatts (MW) at the end of 2012, and is widely used in Europe, Asia, and the United States. At the end of 2012 the photovoltaic (PV) capacity worldwide was 100,000 MW, and PV power stations are popular in Germany and Italy. Solar thermal power stations operate in the USA and Spain, and the largest of these is the 354 MW SEGS power plant in the Mojave Desert. The world's largest geothermal power installation is The Geysers in California, with a rated capacity of 750 MW. Brazil has one of the largest renewable energy programs in the world, involving production of ethanol fuel from sugar cane, and ethanol now provides 18% of the country's automotive fuel. Ethanol fuel is also widely available in the USA.

As of 2011, small solar PV systems provide electricity to a few million households, and micro-hydro configured into mini-grids serves many more. Over 44 million households use biogas made in household-scale digesters for lighting and/or cooking and more than 166 million households rely on a new generation of more-efficient biomass cook stoves. United Nations' Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said that renewable energy has the ability to lift the poorest nations to new levels of prosperity.

Renewable energy resources and significant opportunities for energy efficiency exist over wide geographical areas, in contrast to other energy sources, which are concentrated in a limited number of countries. Rapid deployment of renewable energy and energy efficiency, and technological diversification of energy sources, would result in significant energy security and economic benefits.

Renewable energy replaces conventional fuels in four distinct areas: electricity generation, hot water/space heating, motor fuels, and rural (off-grid) energy services:

Power generation. Renewable energy provides 19% of electricity generation worldwide. Renewable power generators are spread across many countries, and wind power alone already provides a significant share of electricity in some areas: for example, 14% in the U.S. state of Iowa, 40% in the northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein, and 49% in Denmark. Some countries get most of their power from renewables, including Iceland (100%), Norway (98%), Brazil (86%), Austria (62%), New Zealand (65%), and Sweden (54%).

Heating. Solar hot water makes an important contribution to renewable heat in many countries, most notably in China, which now has 70% of the global total (180 GWth). Most of these systems are installed on multi-family apartment buildings and meet a portion of the hot water needs of an estimated 50–60 million households in China. Worldwide, total installed solar water heating systems meet a portion of the water heating needs of over 70 million households. The use of biomass for heating continues to grow as well. In Sweden, national use of biomass energy has surpassed that of oil. Direct geothermal for heating is also growing rapidly.

Transport fuels. Renewable biofuels have contributed to a significant decline in oil consumption in the United States since 2006. The 93 billion liters of biofuels produced worldwide in 2009 displaced the equivalent of an estimated 68 billion liters of gasoline, equal to about 5% of world gasoline production.

History

Prior to the development of coal in the mid 19th century, nearly all energy used was renewable. Almost without a doubt the oldest known use of renewable energy, in the form of traditional biomass to fuel fires, dates from 790,000 years ago. Use of biomass for fire did not become commonplace until many hundreds of thousands of years later, sometime between 200,000 and 400,000 years ago.

Probably the second oldest usage of renewable energy is harnessing the wind in order to drive ships over water. This practice can be traced back some 7000 years, to ships on the Nile.

Moving into the time of recorded history, the primary sources of traditional renewable energy were human labor, animal power, water power, and wind, in grain crushing windmills, and firewood, a traditional biomass. A graph of energy use in the United States up until 1900 shows oil and natural gas with about the same importance in 1900 as wind and solar played in 2010.

By 1873, concerns of running out of coal prompted experiments with using solar energy. Development of solar engines continued until the outbreak of World War 1. The importance of solar energy was recognized in a 1911 *Scientific American* article: "in the far distant future, natural fuels having been exhausted [solar power] will remain as the only means of existence of the human race".

The theory of peak oil was published in 1956. In the 1970s environmentalists promoted the development of renewable energy both as a replacement for the eventual depletion of oil, as well as for an escape from dependence on oil, and the first electricity generating wind turbines appeared. Solar had long been used for heating and cooling, but solar panels were too costly to build solar farms until 1980.

Mainstream renewable technologies

Wind power

The Shepherds Flat Wind Farm is a 845 megawatt (MW) wind farm in the U.S. state of Oregon.

Airflows can be used to run wind turbines. Modern utility-scale wind turbines range from around 600 kW to 5 MW of rated power, although turbines with rated output of 1.5–3 MW have become the most common for commercial use; the power available from the wind is a function of the cube of the wind speed, so as wind speed increases, power output increases dramatically up to the maximum output for the particular turbine. Areas where winds are stronger and more constant, such as offshore and high altitude sites are preferred locations for wind farms. Typical capacity factors are 20-40%, with values at the upper end of the range in particularly favorable sites.

Globally, the long-term technical potential of wind energy is believed to be five times total current global energy production, or 40 times current electricity demand, assuming all practical barriers needed were overcome. This would require wind turbines to be installed over large areas, particularly in areas of higher wind resources, such as offshore. As offshore wind speeds average ~90% greater than that of land, so offshore resources can contribute substantially more energy than land stationed turbines.

Hydropower

Energy in water can be harnessed and used. Since water is about 800 times denser than air, even a slow flowing stream of water, or moderate sea swell, can yield considerable amounts of energy. There are many forms of water energy:

- Hydroelectric energy is a term usually reserved for large-scale hydroelectric dams. The largest of which is the Three Gorges Dam in China and a smaller example is the Akosombo Dam in Ghana.

- Micro hydro systems are hydroelectric power installations that typically produce up to 100 kW of power. They are often used in water rich areas as a remote-area power supply (RAPS).
- Run-of-the-river hydroelectricity systems derive kinetic energy from rivers and oceans without the creation of a large reservoir.

Hydropower is produced in 150 countries, with the Asia-Pacific region generating 32 percent of global hydropower in 2010. China is the largest hydroelectricity producer, with 721 terawatt-hours of production in 2010, representing around 17 percent of domestic electricity use. There are now three hydroelectricity plants larger than 10 GW: the Three Gorges Dam in China, Itaipu Dam across the Brazil/Paraguay border, and Guri Dam in Venezuela.

Solar energy

Solar energy, radiant light and heat from the sun, is harnessed using a range of ever-evolving technologies such as solar heating, solar photovoltaic, solar thermal electricity, solar architecture and artificial photosynthesis.

Solar technologies are broadly characterized as either passive solar or active solar depending on the way they capture, convert and distribute solar energy. Active solar techniques include the use of photovoltaic panels and solar thermal collectors to harness the energy. Passive solar techniques include orienting a building to the Sun, selecting materials with favorable thermal mass or light dispersing properties, and designing spaces that naturally circulate air.

Solar power is the conversion of sunlight into electricity, either directly using photovoltaic (PV), or indirectly using concentrated solar power (CSP). Concentrated solar power systems use lenses or mirrors and tracking systems to focus a large area of sunlight into a small beam. Commercial concentrated solar power plants were first developed in the 1980s. Photovoltaic convert light into electric current using the photoelectric effect. Photovoltaic are an important and relatively inexpensive source of electrical energy where grid power is inconvenient, unreasonably expensive to connect, or simply unavailable. However, as the cost of solar electricity is falling, solar power is also increasingly

being used even in grid-connected situations as a way to feed low-carbon energy into the grid.

In 2011, the International Energy Agency said that "the development of affordable, inexhaustible and clean solar energy technologies will have huge longer-term benefits. It will increase countries' energy security through reliance on an indigenous, inexhaustible and mostly import-independent resource, enhance sustainability, reduce pollution, lower the costs of mitigating climate change, and keep fossil fuel prices lower than otherwise. These advantages are global. Hence the additional costs of the incentives for early deployment should be considered learning investments; they must be wisely spent and need to be widely shared".

Biomass

Biomass is biological material derived from living, or recently living organisms. It most often refers to plants or plant-derived materials which are specifically called lignocelluloses biomass. As an energy source, biomass can either be used directly via combustion to produce heat, or indirectly after converting it to various forms of biofuels. Conversion of biomass to biofuels can be achieved by different methods which are broadly classified into: thermal, chemical, and biochemical methods.

Wood remains the largest biomass energy source today;[36] examples include forest residues (such as dead trees, branches and tree stumps), yard clippings, wood chips and even municipal solid waste. In the second sense, biomass includes plant or animal matter that can be converted into fibers or other industrial chemicals, including biofuels. Industrial biomass can be grown from numerous types of plants, including miscanthus, switch grass, hemp, corn, poplar, willow, sorghum, sugarcane, bamboo, and a variety of tree species, ranging from eucalyptus to oil palm (palm oil).

Plant energy is produced by crops specifically grown for use as fuel that offer high biomass output per hectare with low input energy. Some examples of these plants are wheat, which typically yield 7.5–8 tons (tones?) of grain per hectare,

and straw, which typically yield 3.5–5 tons (tones?) per hectare in the UK. The grain can be used for liquid transportation fuels while the straw can be burned to produce heat or electricity. Plant biomass can also be degraded from cellulose to glucose through a series of chemical treatments, and the resulting sugar can then be used as a first generation biofuels.

Biomass can be converted to other usable forms of energy like methane gas or transportation fuels like ethanol and biodiesel. Rotting garbage, and agricultural and human waste, all release methane gas—also called "landfill gas" or "biogas." Crops, such as corn and sugar cane, can be fermented to produce the transportation fuel, ethanol. Biodiesel, another transportation fuel, can be produced from left-over food products like vegetable oils and animal fats. Also, biomass to liquids (BTLs) and cellulosic ethanol are still under research.

There is a great deal of research involving algal, or algae-derived, biomass due to the fact that it's a non-food resource and can be produced at rates 5 to 10 times those of other types of land-based agriculture, such as corn and soy. Once harvested, it can be fermented to produce biofuels such as ethanol, butanol, and methane, as well as biodiesel and hydrogen.

The biomass used for electricity generation varies by region. Forest by-products, such as wood residues, are common in the United States. Agricultural waste is common in Mauritius (sugar cane residue) and Southeast Asia (rice husks). Animal husbandry residues, such as poultry litter, are common in the UK.

Geothermal energy

Geothermal energy is from thermal energy generated and stored in the Earth. Thermal energy is the energy that determines the temperature of matter. Earth's geothermal energy originates from the original formation of the planet (20%) and from radioactive decay of minerals (80%). The geothermal gradient, which is the difference in temperature between the core of the planet and its surface, drives a continuous conduction of thermal energy in the form of heat from the core to the surface. The adjective geothermal originates from the Greek roots geo, meaning earth, and thermos, meaning heat.

The heat that is used for geothermal energy can be from deep within the Earth, all the way down to Earth's core – 4,000 miles (6,400 km) down. At the core, temperatures may reach over 9,000 °F (5,000 °C). Heat conducts from the core to surrounding rock. Extremely high temperature and pressure cause some rock to melt, which is commonly known as magma. Magma convicts upward since it is lighter than the solid rock. This magma then heats rock and water in the crust, sometimes up to 700 °F (371 °C).

From hot springs, geothermal energy has been used for bathing since Paleolithic times and for space heating since ancient Roman times, but it is now better known for electricity generation.