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## Where do we put all those windmills?

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The latest enthusiasm for alternative energy often fails to take into account a fundamental problem facing new energy facilities: where do we put them?

Siting new energy projects, from power lines to oil refineries to wind farms, has become increasingly difficult in recent years. And unless we acknowledge and confront these problems soon, our energy conflicts could shift from the Middle East into our own backyards.

Heated siting debates have been plagued by outraged finger-pointing from all directions. Industry experts blame the public for its NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) attitude. The public remembers poor siting decisions in the past. Policymakers focus on the lack of incentive for new construction, and the media turn the spotlight on high-profile controversies, like the Cross-Sound Cable, a power line connecting New York and Connecticut below Long Island Sound.

All this chaos has given birth to a new acronym in the siting alphabet soup, BANANA: build-absolutely-nothing-anywhere-near-anything.

Given the trouble with siting conventional energy facilities today, where will we site the projects of our alternative energy future?

Although a sweeping field of switchgrass in place of a grim smokestack sets up an appealingly green image, alternative and renewable energy sources require new infrastructure. And clean energy does not necessarily mean invisible, waste-free facilities, especially when we suddenly need enough of them to replace the equivalent of, say, 75 percent of our Middle Eastern oil consumption.

Bio-refineries, clean coal plants and hydrogen stations have to start somewhere in order for the administration's Advanced Energy Initiative to, well, advance. But the president's speeches to promote clean fuel seem to take for granted that technology alone will carry us forward, and the public will welcome new facilities into their backyards when the time comes.

In stark contrast to this executive optimism are a handful of recent renewable energy projects that have spawned as much public outcry as more conventional dirty facilities. Take, for instance, the troubled plans to build wind turbines in Nantucket Sound, the Kennedy family's famous backyard.

Pollution, emissions and other negative environmental impacts are only some of the reasons for public opposition to energy facilities. Less tangible issues, like the disruption of scenic views and uncertain health and safety risks, become more relevant in the case of alternative energy projects, where facilities could be limited to locations on pristine mountains or in coastal waters.

In spite of these roadblocks, siting problems are not insurmountable, and there are signs of progress.

The 2005 Energy Policy Act attempts to address some long-standing siting barriers with the creation of integrated energy corridors on federal lands in the West. These proposed corridors would combine the siting of different types of facilities, such as power lines and gas pipelines, to minimize regulatory redundancy and permitting hassles.

Additionally, the FutureGen Industrial Alliance, a public-private partnership to develop a prototype "zero-emissions" power plant in the United States, plans to soon issue a request for siting proposals. Both of these efforts are too new to have shown any real progress or provide a clear way forward for other alternative technologies, but they serve as an early and important test.

Energy independence has a nice ring to it in the current political climate, and to be fair, President Bush is not the only one who has turned a blind eye to siting in favor of more tractable energy problems, like developing new technology. But for the United States to realistically move forward on securing our national energy future, we need to make these issues part of our energy research and development agenda now. Otherwise, alternative energy facilities will remain in the realm of new conventional energy facilities: unbuilt.

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