Our Ocean Backyard

Article No. 390

Gary Griggs

Progress on Renewables but Continued Oil Company Deception

“We are all entitled to our own opinions, but not our own facts”. This was one of many memorable quotes from Daniel Patrick Moynihan who served four terms in the United States Senate representing New York and also served as Assistant Secretary of Labor under Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. He subsequently was an Assistant to President Richard Nixon for Domestic Policy. Moynihan was appointed by President Gerald Ford as Ambassador to India and later as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Having served under Presidents of both parties says something important about this man, something that would be a rare commodity in today’s national politics.

The important message here is that there are opinions and there are facts, and these can get hopelessly mixed up and confused in today’s media. We can pretty much listen to or read anything we choose and get quite different information presented as “facts” and then argue with others about these “facts” as we believe them. Another quote from a well-known astrophysicist and science educator, Neil degrasse Tyson, is important here – “The wonderful thing about sciences is that it’s true, whether or not you believe it”.

We are all products of many different experiences, education, events, parents and families, histories and a whole lot more, which clearly affects how we see the world. I have been accused of being overly optimistic about the state of the world, particularly as it relates to climate, the oceans, the environment and the future of the planet. I prefer to think of my outlook as one of sober optimism, and find that as a parent, grandparent, and teacher, that we all need to have hope. So I tend to look for positive news.

An announcement appeared this past week from the U.S. Energy Information Administration that for the first time, more electricity was generated from renewable sources in the U.S. over the course of a year than from coal. This is important and encouraging news. While natural gas produced 40 percent of U.S. electricity in 2022, the share of renewables just passed 20 percent, comparable to coal and nuclear. There is still a long way to go for renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, but they have been increasing consistently. On a global scale, similar changes are coming; renewables are projected to outweigh coal in electrical generation by 2027, just four years from now.

In the United States California ranks 3rd in production of electricity from renewable sources, behind Texas and Washington

These percentages are only for energy sources for electricity generation. If we look at total energy usage, transportation becomes a huge user, primarily from petroleum. In the U.S. in 2021, fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas and coal) provided 77% of our total energy, renewables provided 12.2%, and nuclear 8.1%. There is no question that we have a long way to go to provide even 50% of our energy needs from renewable sources, but we are moving rapidly in the right direction. The longer our dependence on fossil fuels continues, however, the more carbon dioxide will be emitted into the atmosphere and the more damaging impacts of climate change we will experience. And you know what those are.

A little over a month ago, British Petroleum, one of the planet’s largest corporations, scaled back its climate ambitions as it announced that its annual profits more than doubled to $28 billion in 2022 after a sharp increase in gas prices linked to the war in Ukraine boosted its earnings. Shell’s profits more than doubled to $40 billion. British Petroleum cut its emissions pledge and plans a greater production of oil and gas over the next seven years compared with previous plans. The CEO of BP had his yearly salary doubled last year to $12 million.

The sooner we can move to renewables the sooner we can slow the rate of global climate change. The fossil fuel companies have a huge role to play but are going in the wrong direction – profits over people.

In the early 1980s, the United States biggest energy companies were well aware of their impact on climate. This posed a threat to their business, selling fossil fuels. Exxon even directed its scientists to create mathematical models that calculated how rising carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would change the Earth in the decades ahead – and they were surprisingly accurate. Their own scientists had warned the leadership of Exxon that continuing to burn fossil fuels would lead to “catastrophic” and “irreversible” consequences.

But beginning in 1989, Exxon publicly dismissed its own scientists’ conclusions. The corporation’s leaders cast doubt on the credibility of climate science criticizing models and emphasizing how uncertainty made them essentially worthless. It’s part of a bigger story of how many energy companies misled the public for years about climate change while their executives continued to downplay the impacts of rising carbon dioxide emissions while their profits soared. The emerging evidence of this deception has become the foundation for dozens of lawsuits against the big energy companies with cities, counties and states going to court to hold the companies and governments responsible for the damages from climate change.