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An unfair fight for renewable energies



By Arnold Schwarzenegger,
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More energy from the sun hits Earth in one hour than all the energy consumed on our planet in an entire year.

In those terms, it is absurd that our federal government spends tens of billions of dollars annually subsidizing the oil industry, which pulls diminishing resources from underground, while the industry focused above ground on wind, solar and other renewable energies is derided in Washington.

Federal support for development of new energy sources is lower today than at any other point in U.S. history, and our government is forcing the clean-energy sector into a competitive disadvantage. To bring true competition to the energy market, ensure our national security and create jobs here rather than in China or elsewhere, we must level the playing field for renewable energies. In this presidential primary, Americans need to hear where the candidates stand on this critical issue.

Don't get me wrong — we should not demonize fossil fuels. For more than 200 years, the United States has rightly invested in developing new sources of energy. From the land grants for timber and coal in the 1800s to the tax expenditures for oil and gas in the early 20th century to the investment in developing nuclear energy, support for energy innovation has always helped drive America's growth.

Renewable energies, however, have not been treated the same way. When the oil, gas and nuclear industries were forming, federal support for those energies totaled as much as 1 percent of federal spending. Subsidies available to the renewables industry today are just one-tenth of 1 percent.

If our goal is to encourage competition in the energy marketplace, then the conversation in Congress shouldn't be about attacking green energy or cutting all oil subsidies. The

conversation should be about leveling the playing field so that renewables are bound by the same rules as fossil fuels. We must make it a national priority to clear the red tape and bureaucracy that puts renewables at a disadvantage. If the candidates running for president believe in energy independence as a matter of national security — regardless of whether they agree with the science behind climate change — then the issue of investing in renewable energies must be front and center in the campaign.

Instead of a simplistic and misleading one-word argument against green energy — [Solyndra!](#) — I'd like to hear from the candidates that government shouldn't pick winners, as it clearly has with our lopsided subsidies. Instead of talking about one terrible green investment or, for that matter, any of the investments in fossil fuels that have cost billions, I'd like to hear them talk about how to make sure we properly vet all our investments to get a good return for the American people.

Federal investment is critical to the success of the renewable energy industry. That's not a new idea. The same was true for coal, which would not have been economically feasible without tax exemptions and incentives. It was also true for offshore oil drilling, which was deemed unprofitable without royalty waivers and favorable packaging of federal leases.

Imagine what the renewables industry would look like if the federal government leveled the playing field and showed the same dedication we have in California. Our green sector is the brightest spot in California's economy, having grown 10 times faster than any other business sector since 2005. Today, [one in every four jobs](#) in the U.S. solar industry is in California. One-third of U.S. clean-tech venture capital flows into our state. Nurturing the green-tech sector was the right thing for me to do as governor, and it is the right thing for the federal government to do.

I know from experience that it is frustrating for states to wait for the federal government to take action. Around the world, countries await treaties and international consensus. The [United Nations convention on climate change](#) is taking place in Durban, South Africa. The U.N. leadership on this subject has been great, but I don't think we should just wait around. That's why I am focusing on sub-national work; states, provinces and regions have shown that the time for action is now.

What our nation needs — for our economy, our national security and our environment — is more than a treaty signed by dignitaries. We need a level field on which the United States allows renewable energies to develop by the same rules as oil. If we can get there, the bountiful clean energy above our planet's surface will compete well with the oil beneath it.

The writer is the former governor of California.

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