

Renewable Energy Terms

Renewable

Not "Alternative," and Certainly Not "Alternate"

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Derivation: RE- *Middle English from Old French from Latin: again, anew.* NEW *Middle English "newe" from Old English "niwe" or "neowe": recent, fresh, rejuvenated, additional.* -ABLE *Middle English from Old French from Latin "-abilus": susceptible, capable, or worthy of a specified action.*

When I was younger and saucier, I teased my now co-worker Michael Welch about his use of the term "renewable." "Coal and nuclear power are renewable," I said, "they just take longer to renew!"

Well, with that sort of logic, I suppose I could have gone into politics. But the key thing is that solar, wind, and hydroelectric energy are *immediately* renewable, while coal, oil, and uranium take millions of years to develop.

Most energy forms find their origins in the sun. The sun drives the hydrological cycle, evaporating water from the oceans and dumping it in the mountains so it can flow down to the sea again, driving our hydro turbines on the way. The sun's heat also makes the wind, heating some areas more than others and making high and low pressure areas that create winds.

For years, the technologies that attempt to capture this natural energy have been called "alternative energy." But hanging onto this label hobbles our renewable horse before it leaves the gate. "Alternative" means something abnormal—something outside existing institutions or systems. That's not what we want for renewables, so why use this label? We want renewable energy to be the norm, not something outside the norm. Besides, human use of wind and solar energy pre-dates

the use of fossil fuels by many thousands of years. In the perspective of human life on our planet, fossil fuels are a less conventional alternative.

By using a positive and descriptive label—renewable energy—we tell people why we are excited about these technologies. We also raise a not so subtle question—are other technologies *not* renewable? When you harvest some sunshine with your PVs, or some wind energy with your turbine, more sunshine and wind will follow it the next day. When you mine coal, oil, or uranium, you use something that is, for all practical purposes, irreplaceable.

Some people have been known to use the phrase "alternate energy" to describe solar technologies. Some even use it as part of their business names. This is unfortunate, since it's not the proper use of the word.

"Alternate" means changing back and forth, taking turns, or every other one. It also means a stand-in or substitute. We see it used to describe "alternating current," among other things. But I now hear it used as a synonym for "alternative" quite often. At some point, word purists have to let go and let the language change, even through misuse. But it still makes me wince to hear it.

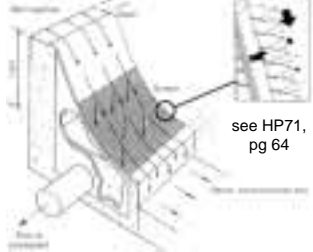
The phrase "renewable energy" is becoming more common, and that's all for the good. It is a positive and clear statement of what we are working toward. It means energy that comes not from finite resources that can be exhausted, but from sources that continue to provide clean energy day after day and year after year.

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