

Newsletter for the week of Jul 9, 2026 : Energy

Individual Charitable Giving is Up:

Despite Elon Musk's (dubious) claim that charitable giving is "very hard" and that, in his opinion, most charitable giving just makes things worse anyway, charitable giving by individuals – people like you and me, not billionaires – amounted to almost \$400 billion in 2025. Most billionaires donate through foundations, and total giving from foundations was \$117 billion. A big chunk of that was by one person, Jeff Bezos' ex-wife MacKenzie Scott, whose net worth over the year increased by more than the amount of her giving (which totalled \$19.2 billion!) Imagine the good he could have done if Musk had just given away half of the amount by which his fortune grew last year! (Source: Fortune Magazine, July 4, 2026)

The Battle is Over. Renewables Have Won.

Multiple sources have revealed that the cost of generating electricity via solar, wind and geothermal is now *less* than any fossil fuel generation. That's even if you factor in battery storage. Not only is it less expensive, but it takes less time – from proposal to full implementation – to bring solar or wind power generation on line. It should be noted that adding battery or other storage technology to wind or solar means that electricity can still be provided to the grid even at night or during periods of no wind. Geothermal is not subject to weather or time-of-day constraints.

That cost advantage for renewables is a major reason that 6.4-gigawatts of new solar production has come on line in the first quarter of this year, despite a Federal policy that is actively hostile to clean renewable energy. It also raises serious questions about Governor Scott's veto of a bill that would have required any new data centers in Vermont to use renewable energy rather than fossil fuels. You wouldn't think that we'd have to tell data center developers to spend less money on their power generation. Maybe they should consult their own artificial intelligence before making future investments?

Solar Siting Without Fighting

Nobody wants a huge solar farm next door. Likewise, no one wants to see huge tracts of agricultural or forest land given over to acres of solar panels. And certainly no one wants to be threatened with lawsuits for opposing such projects. But there are plenty of places to put solar panels without hurting the landscape or quality of life. Switzerland

has shown that solar panels can be laid between train tracks, and have run over 11,000 trains over their test installation without interrupting power generation. Every time I look out over Bennington, I see rooftops of commercial buildings that could easily host solar panels (full disclosure, I am one of the owners of the solar array on the Holden-Leonard Mill on Benmont Avenue.) Then there are parking lots, which could easily host raised panels while making our cars cooler on those hot summer days. California has even covered their canals used to transport municipal water with solar panels, which not only generates electricity, but reduces water loss from evaporation. Floating solar panels on lakes or other bodies of water creates new habitats for fish and invertebrates, bringing life to the parts of the lake that normally has very little (most aquatic life lives at or near the shore and in shallow waters.) And I have to believe that there would be much more residential rooftop solar if incentives were still available.

Well, what about those agricultural lands? In truth, the amount of agricultural land taken over for solar generation is tiny compared to the amount used for housing. We need housing, and while I understand that, I would rather see infill development and higher density in already-developed areas than have towns sprawl into agricultural and forest lands. I think we'll have some of both, but let's be clear: solar is not what's driving the loss of agricultural lands.

Another alternative is so-called agrivoltaic: installation of solar panels in crop or pasture lands that allows their continued use for farming and grazing. Some studies have indicated that, with the proper design, solar arrays in farmland or pasture benefits grazing animals, and provides opportunities for farming of cash crops around solar arrays. The farmer realizes the extra income from power generation, while still retaining the original use of the land. As an added benefit, health of farm workers is improved by providing them shade while working in those dual-purpose fields.

Solar Siting Without Fighting

Siting is a problem with a solution. A bigger problem is that the Trump administration is actively trying to stop both solar and wind power projects. The worst example of this is that taxpayer money – to the tune of billions of dollars – is being paid to companies that were planning to implement offshore wind generation to get them to cancel their projects. The administration's transparent excuse – unspecified national security concerns – masks the fact that the only beneficiaries of such a policy are the oil and gas companies (and maybe even coal) that will benefit when expensive, dirty fossil fuel plants are built to make up for the lost clean energy projects that would have come on line had the government not interfered.

Of course, that problem has a solution, too: we all need to vote for rational people who will do the right thing by supporting the conversion of our dependence on fossil fuels to an investment in the future of clean energy. All of this makes sense on a purely economic level. If there was a free market for energy development, solar, wind and geothermal would be our future. As it is, despite the administration's best efforts, even states like Texas, which is the heart of the US oil industry, are seeing increased investment in solar generation.

Despite the lack of incentives, solar and wind energy continue to grow on their own merits. That's similar to what is happening with electric vehicles. Higher gasoline prices have driven more people to EVs, despite the lack of rebates, tax credits and other incentives. And electric vehicles have demonstrated that they are less expensive to run (especially if you have rooftop solar at home) and despite fears to the contrary, EV batteries have a long lifetime. All of that means you will spend less money over the life of the electric vehicle than you would with a conventional gasoline engine, or even a hybrid. I believe we can expect those trends to continue, as more clean energy generation continues to come on line, efficiency of both generation and consumption of solar and battery technologies continues to improve. You can expect all of that to add up to lower energy costs and less dependence on fossil fuels and their volatile markets.

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