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Why Stewart Brand is Wrong on Nukes - and is Losing

by Harvey Wasserman

Stewart Brand has become a poster boy for a "nuclear renaissance" that has just suffered a quiet but stunning defeat. Despite \$645 million spent in lobbying over the past decade, the reactor industry has thus far failed to gouge out major new taxpayer funding for new commercial reactors.

In an exceedingly complex series of twists and turns, no legislation now pending in Congress contains firm commitments to the tens of billions reactor builders have been demanding. They could still come by the end of the session. But the radioactive cake walk many expected the industry to take through the budget process has thus far failed to happen.

The full story is excruciatingly complicated. But the core reasons are simple: atomic power can't compete, and [makes global warming worse](#).

In support of this failed 20th Century technology, the industry has enlisted a 20th Century retro-hero, Stewart Brand. Back in the 1960s Brand published the Whole Earth Catalog. Four decades later, that cachet has brought him media access for his advocacy of corporate technologies like genetically modified foods and geo-engineering.....and, of course, nuclear energy.

In response to [a cover interview in Marin County's Pacific Sun](#), I wrote the following to explain why Stewart is wrong wrong wrong:

Stewart Brand now seems to equate "science" with a tragic and dangerous corporate agenda. The technologies for which he argues--nuclear power, "clean" coal, genetically modified crops, etc.--can be very profitable for big corporations, but carry huge risks for the rest of us. In too many instances, tangible damage has already been done, and more is clearly threatened.

If there is a warning light for what Stewart advocates, it is the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which much of the oil industry said (like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl) was "impossible." Then it happened. The \$75 million liability limit protecting BP should be ample warning that any technology with a legal liability limit (like nuclear power) cannot be tolerated.

Thankfully, there is good news: We have true green alternatives to these failed 20th-century ideas. They're cheaper, safer, cleaner, more reliable and more job-producing than the old ways Stewart advocates.

Stewart and I have never met. But we have debated on the radio and online. Thank you, Pacific Sun, for bringing us to print.

Stewart's advocacy does fit a pattern. He appears to have become a paladin for large-scale corporate technologies that may be highly profitable to CEOs and shareholders, but are beyond the control of the average citizen, and work to our detriment. Because he makes so many simple but costly errors, let's try a laundry list:

1. Like other reactor advocates, Stewart cavalierly dismisses the nuclear waste problem by advocating, among other things, the stuff be simply dumped down a deep hole. This is a terribly dangerous idea and will not happen. Suffice it to say that after a half-century of promises (the first commercial reactor opened in Pennsylvania in 1957) the solution now being offered by government and industry is...a committee!!! Meanwhile, more than 60,000 tons of uniquely lethal spent fuel rods sit at some 65 sites in 31 states with nowhere to go. Like the reactors themselves, they are vulnerable to cooling failure, terror attack, water shortages, overheating of lakes, rivers and oceans, flooding, earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes, and much more. This is no legacy to leave our children.

2. Equally disturbing is the industry's inability to get meaningful private liability insurance. The current federally imposed limit is \$11 billion, which would disappear in a meltdown even faster than BP's \$75 million in the Gulf. According to the latest compendium of studies, issued this spring by the New York Annals of Science, Chernobyl has killed some 985,000 people, and is by no means finished. It has done at least a half-trillion dollars in damage. The uninsured death toll and financial costs of a similar-scaled accident in the U.S. are incalculable, but would clearly kill millions and bankrupt our nation for the foreseeable future.

3. Stewart points out that there are also risks with wind and solar power. But clearly none that begin to compare with nukes, coal or deep-water drilling. If reactor owners were forced to find reasonable liability insurance, all would shut. A similar demand for renewables and efficiency would leave them unaffected.

4. Renewable/efficiency technologies today are cheaper, faster to deploy and more job-creating than nukes. It takes a minimum of five years to license and build a new reactor. The one being done by AREVA in Finland is hugely over budget and behind schedule. There is no reason to expect anything better here. Among other things, the long lead time

ties up for too many years the critical social capital that could otherwise go to technology that can quickly let the planet heal.

5. Like others who doubt the possibility of a green-powered Earth, Stewart posits the straw man of reliance on a deployment of solar panels that would blanket the desert and do ecological harm. In fact, the National Renewable Energy Lab estimates 100 percent of the nation's electricity could come from an area 90 miles on a side, or a relatively modest box of 8,100 square miles. But as we all know, that's not how it will be done. Solar panels belong on rooftops, where there is ample area throughout the nation, and an end to transmission costs. Likewise, wind farms do not "cover" endless acres of prairie, their tower bases take up tiny spots that remain surrounded by productive farmland. In this case, currently available wind turbines spinning between the Mississippi and the Rockies could generate 300 percent of the nation's electricity. There's sufficient potential in North Dakota, Kansas and Texas alone to do 100 percent. Cost and installation times put nukes to shame. The liability is nil, as is the bird kill, which primarily affects obsolete, badly sited fast-spinning machines in places like Altamont Pass. Those must come down, and there will certainly be other surprises along the way. No technology is perfect, and we need to be careful even with those that are green-based. But as we have seen, further threats on the scale of Chernobyl and the Deepwater Horizon cannot be sustained.

6. As for GMO crops, Darwin was right. Plants evolve to avoid herbicides just as bugs work their way around pesticides (which Stewart correctly decries). Now we see that "super-weeds" are outsmarting the carefully engineered herbicides meant to justify the whole GMO scheme, bringing a disastrous reversion to horrific, lethal old sprays. Chemical farming may be good for corporate profits, but it can kill global sustainability. In the long run, only organics can sustain us.

7. Stewart mentions that he is paid only for speeches. But a single such fee can outstrip an entire year's pay for a grassroots organizer or volunteer. What's remarkable is that the nuclear power industry spent some \$645 million lobbying for its "renaissance" over the past decade--more than \$64 million/year. It has bought an army of corporate lobbyists and legislators. Yet only a handful of folks with rear guard environmental credentials has stepped forward to fight for the old fossil/nuclear/GMO technologies.

Stewart is certainly welcome to his own opinions. But not to his own facts. Pushing for a nuclear "renaissance" concedes that it's a Dark Age technology, defined by unsustainable costs, inefficiencies, danger, eco-destruction, radiation releases, lack of insurance, uncertain decommissioning costs, vulnerability to terrorism and much more.

That the industry must desperately seek taxpayer help, and cannot find insurance for even this "newer, safer" generation, is the ultimate testimony to its failure. By contrast, renewables and efficiency are booming, and are a practical solution to our energy needs, which the corporate clunkers of the previous century simply cannot provide.

It's been a long time since the Whole Earth Catalog was published. Its hallowed founder should wake up to the booming holistic green technologies that are poised to save the Earth. They are ready to roll over the obsolete corporate boondoggles that are killing Her. Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, the disasters in the coal mines and the Gulf remind us we need to make that green-powered transition as fast as we possibly can.

Harvey Wasserman's SOLARTOPIA! OUR GREEN-POWERED EARTH, A.D. 2030, is at www.solartopia.org. He is senior advisor to Greenpeace USA and the Nuclear Information & Resource Service, and writes regularly for www.freepress.org.

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