



International

THE BIG ENERGY GAMBLE

1 x 60 HD

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CONTACT

Tom Koch, Director
WGBH International
One Guest Street
Boston, Ma 02135 USA

TEL 617-300-3893
FAX 617-779-7900

tom_koch@wgbh.org
wgbhinternational.org

For the past three decades US per capita energy consumption has steadily risen at about the same rate as the greenhouse gases currently threatening the earth. There is, however, one surprising exception to this dangerous trend: the sprawling, car-crazy, conspicuous consumption land known as California. Over the same thirty-year period, Californians' personal energy use (not counting cars) has stayed at 1970's levels—a whopping 30% below the rest of the nation. Perhaps even more astounding, California ranks fifth lowest in per capita gasoline consumption. Does California know something about energy the rest of us do not?

As the federal government searches for pathways to an energy future less dependent on the fossil fuels responsible for global climate change and less vulnerable to the equally dangerous conflicts in the fuel-rich Middle East, California is forging ahead on its own. And as the world's sixth largest economy, it has the power to do just that. More importantly, it seems to be succeeding on all fronts—from energy conservation and efficiency, to the development of new sources of carbon-free power. But how is California reaching energy standards others are barely talking about?

The state's support of new energy is fostering a clean-tech boom in start up companies (especially in Silicon Valley) that has become the envy of Wall Street, and in a certain sense, California has long been preparing for the changes it has now come to embrace. While America produces about 2% renewable power, California is at 12%. By pushing to the lead in the race to save the planet, however, the state is also discovering all the bumps in the road.

Until renewable energy technology improves, California's power needs—the largest in America despite efficiency gains—will in the short run continue to contribute to rising global CO₂ emissions. But the foundations for a cleaner energy future are clearly being laid. For example, consumers can now get smart electric meters that allow them to go online, read their electricity usage, and if they wish, raise or lower thermostats to lower consumption. The power companies themselves can now automatically transfer electricity from one sector to another, wherever demand is high.

Just as the state's more affluent citizens cannot lead an energy revolution on its own, California cannot lead the nation alone. Nevertheless, the federal government is looking closely at "The California Way." There is hardly an energy committee hearing that doesn't have a California expert testifying on conditions in the state. As the stakes for doing nothing to slow CO₂ emissions grow with each passing day and the projected price tag for storm and drought mitigation grows catastrophically expensive, far out Californians may just be the realists, not the dreamers. As NOVA discovers, a nation fully committed to economic growth through safer energy policies seems to be what California is all about.

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CREDITS

Senior Executive Producer: Paula S. Apsell

Producer, Director, Writer: Larry Klein

A NOVA production for WGBH/Boston

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