

Green With Envy: Researching ways to help environment takes funding

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Cathy Wilson / For The Post / cw224805@ohiou.edu



I was walking down Court Street on Tuesday afternoon when I heard the question, “Excuse me, do you have a minute for the environment?”

Of course I had a minute for the environment! So I turned around to find a guy with a clipboard, which is always fun, and I decided to listen to his spiel. He was from Environment Ohio, an organization dedicated to “clean air, clean water and open spaces” according to its Web site’s mission statement.

He was explaining to passersby — well, the few who stop for anyone wanting a moment of someone’s time on Court Street — about Senate Bill 221, which said that 12.5 percent of Ohio’s energy would need to come from renewable and clean energy by 2025. The bill is being considered by the Public Utilities Committee in the Ohio House of Representatives, and this guy was urging people to call their local state representatives and senators to tell them to support this initiative.

After the brief informational session, he asked me if I wanted to be a member of Environment Ohio, for a membership fee of \$10 for two months, if I remember correctly. I immediately apologized, and he knew right away I wouldn’t be reaching for my wallet anytime soon. I think he was just glad to know I cared about the cause and took a pamphlet with me when I left.

My narrative has a purpose, I promise. Later on Tuesday, I read an article from The Washington Post about the by-product of producing polysilicon for solar panels — silicon tetrachloride. Because of the expensive and energy-consuming recycling process of this material, some companies in China have simply been dumping it in open spaces where scientists there say it poisons the soil and prevents anything from growing, not to mention it has detrimental health effects on people.

It seems like every potentially great energy-saving idea seemingly has a negative by-product — the article cited a few as hydropower dams hurting ecosystems and forests being cleared to grow the ingredients for renewable fuels. So then I thought to myself, if we just had more funding, then we could search deeper into these problems, perhaps have more options to choose from and find ways to avoid creating toxic waste.

Science magazine reported that a lack of sufficient funding led the Basic Energy Sciences section of the Department of Energy to pull the plug (pun intended) on an \$80 million initiative that had 700 proposals, including some related to solar energy. After reading this article, I started to realize that demanding funding would necessitate a place for that funding to come from — research isn’t free, and someone has to foot the bill. I suddenly felt very guilty that I hadn’t donated that \$10 toward research earlier in the day.

Talking about supporting a cause is one thing, but action is definitely another. While people applauded (or rolled their eyes) at the

Pope and Queen Elizabeth II valiantly decrying pollution, I wondered if their words would manifest themselves into anything more.

I have realized that the tasks of creating renewable energy sources, figuring out how to safely and efficiently dispose of waste and other quandaries are not going to be magically solved — as far as volunteering and vocal support go, they don't pay the bills. Money doesn't grow on trees (maybe if it did, people wouldn't cut them all down, though), and it must be budgeted and allotted to what seems like a zillion different places. Perhaps if people contacted their local, state and federal government representatives more about this issue, it would gain more attention.

That is just one example of how these scientists and researchers could get their funding. Another idea thrown around is taxing oil companies with the earnings going toward renewable energy initiatives. The Houston Chronicle reported that the chief executive of Marathon Oil Corp. just earned \$13.1 million in 2007 — a pay increase of almost \$5 million from the previous year. Obviously, oil companies are hurting for cash.

The main point here is that the tools to achieve a more sustainable society, like everything else, cost money, which is seemingly scarce for everyone these days. It has become routine for people, corporations and governments to grasp tightly to their cash and ignore the people on the street asking for a moment of their time. The key to energy efficiency is money in the forms of grants or larger budgets (or both) for the people on whom we rely to solve our energy problems. The technology exists, but it isn't cheap.

Cathy Wilson is a junior journalism major. Send her an e-mail at cw224805@ohiou.edu.