

Alternative Measures for the Energy Content of Noncombustible Renewables

Energy sources are measured in different physical units: liquid fuels in barrels or gallons, gases in cubic feet, coal in short tons, and electricity in kilowatthours. EIA converts each source into common British thermal units (Btu) to allow comparison among different types of energy and to calculate total energy concepts.

Noncombustible renewables (hydroelectric, geothermal, solar, and wind energy) are resources from which energy is extracted without burning or combusting fuel. When noncombustible renewables generate electricity, there is no fuel combustion and, therefore, no set Btu conversion factors for the energy sources.¹

There are three broadly accepted ways to convert electricity generated from noncombustible renewables into Btu of primary energy—the captured energy, fossil fuel equivalency, and incident energy approaches. Each of these methods are described in detail below.

Captured Energy Approach

The captured energy approach converts primary energy consumption of noncombustible renewables from kilowatthours (kWh) to Btu using the constant conversion factor representing the heat content of electricity—3,412 Btu per kWh. Captured energy reflects the primary energy captured for economic use and does not include losses. In other words, it represents the net energy available for direct consumption after the transformation of a noncombustible renewable source of energy into electricity, where captured energy is the energy measured as the "output" of a generating unit, such as electricity from a wind turbine or solar plant.

The captured energy approach is often used to show the economically significant portion of the energy transformation associated with renewable energy sources. There is no market for the resource-specific energy apart from its immediate, site-specific energy conversion, and there is no substantive opportunity cost to its continued exploitation.² This approach is preferred by the *UN International Recommendations for Energy Statistics* (IRES) because the detailed data needed to estimate quantities of incident energy are not available now and are not likely to develop soon. This approach is also more closely tied to a physical market commodity, that is, electricity net generation, than the conceptual measure derived using the fossil fuel equivalency approach.

Fossil Fuel Equivalency Approach

The fossil fuel equivalency approach converts the consumption of noncombustible renewable electricity (in kWh) to Btu by applying a fossil fuel equivalency factor, based on the fossil-fuels heat rate (Table A6). The fossil-fuels heat rate is equal to the average thermal efficiency across fossil-fueled fired generating plants based on fuel consumption and net generation data reported to EIA. The fossil fuel equivalent consumption represents the energy consumed as if the electricity were generated by fossil fuels and is useful for analysis when considering the amount of primary fossil fuel energy displaced by renewable energy sources.

However, unlike the captured energy approach, the fossil fuel equivalency approach is not as directly tied to any real market or physical quantity. The fossil fuel equivalency approach measures neither primary energy consumption nor fossil fuels actually displaced. Additionally, its use becomes increasingly problematic as noncombustible renewables begin to displace other renewables instead of fossil fuels.

Incident Energy Approach

Incident energy is the mechanical, radiation, or thermal energy that is measurable as the "input" of the device. EIA defines "incident energy" for noncombustible renewables as the gross energy that first strikes an energy conversion device:

- For hydroelectric, the energy contained in the water passing through the penstock (a closed conduit for carrying water to the turbines)
- For geothermal, the energy contained in the hot fluid at the surface of the wellbore
- For wind, the energy contained in the wind that passes through the rotor disc
- For solar, the energy contained in the sunlight that strikes the panel or collector mirror