

Appendix E: Alternative Approaches for Deriving Energy Contents of Noncombustible Renewables

EIA compiles data on most energy sources in physical units, such as barrels and cubic feet, in order to calculate total primary energy consumption. To sum data for different energy sources, EIA converts the data to the common unit of British thermal units (Btu), a measure that is based on the thermal conversion of energy resources to heat and power.

Noncombustible renewables are resources from which energy is extracted without burning or combusting fuel. They include hydroelectric, geothermal, solar, and wind energy. When noncombustible renewables are used to generate electricity, there is no fuel combustion and, therefore, no set Btu conversion factors for the energy sources.¹ However, there are several possible approaches for converting that electricity to Btu. Three of these approaches are described below.

Fossil Fuel Equivalency Approach

In Sections 1, 2, and 10 of the *Monthly Energy Review*, EIA calculates total primary energy consumption for noncombustible renewable electricity in Btu by applying a fossil fuel equivalency factor. Under that approach, the primary energy consumption of noncombustible renewable electricity can be viewed as the sum of captured energy “transformed into electricity” and an “adjustment for fossil fuel equivalency.”

The adjustment for fossil fuel equivalency is equal to the difference between total primary consumption of noncombustible renewables for electricity generation in Btu (calculated using the fossil fuels heat rate in Table A6) and the captured energy of that electricity (calculated using the constant conversion factor of 3,412 Btu per kWh). The fossil fuels heat rate is equal to the thermal efficiency across fossil fuel-fired generating stations based on net generation. The fossil fuel equivalency adjustment represents the energy that would have been consumed if electricity had been generated by fossil fuels. By using that factor, it is possible, for example, to evaluate fossil fuel requirements for replacing electricity generation during periods of interruptions, such as droughts.

Captured Energy Approach

Captured energy (Tables E1a and E1b) reflects the primary energy captured for economic use and does not include losses. Thus, it is the net energy available for direct consumption after transformation of a noncombustible renewable into electricity. In other words, 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 energy transformations in the United States. 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

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

The incident energy approach to converting noncombustible renewable electricity to Btu could, in theory, be used to account for “losses” that are due to the inability to convert 100% of incident energy to a useful form of energy. EIA does not publish total primary energy consumption estimates based on the incident energy approach because it would be difficult to obtain accurate estimates of input energy without creating undue burden on survey respondents. Few renewable electricity power plants track cumulative input energy due to its lack of economic significance or other purpose. In addition, estimated energy efficiencies of renewable conversion technologies vary significantly across technologies, site-specific configurations, and environmental factors.³

¹Direct use of noncombustible renewables in the form of heat (e.g., solar thermal heating) is estimated separately and is measured in Btu.

²There is an initial opportunity cost when a facility is first built: water behind a dam might flood land that could have been used for other purposes, or a solar panel might shade an area that could have used the sunlight. But that is a “fixed” opportunity cost that does not change during the operation of the plant.

³Based on EIA research conducted in 2016, engineering estimates of conversion efficiencies for noncombustible renewables range from less than 20% for solar photovoltaics and geothermal to 90% for large-scale hydroelectricity plants. Those estimates are notional indications of the energy output as a percent of energy input at each technology based on typical equipment operating within the normal operating range for that technology.

Table E1a. Noncombustible Renewable Primary Energy Consumption: Conventional Hydroelectric Power, Geothermal, and Wind (Trillion Btu)

	Conventional Hydroelectric Power ^a			Geothermal ^b				Wind ^c		
	Transformed Into Electricity ^{d,e}	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^f	Total Primary Energy ^g	Direct Consumption ^h	Transformed Into Electricity ^{d,i}	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^f	Total Primary Energy ^j	Transformed Into Electricity ^{d,i}	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^f	Total Primary Energy ^g
1950	344	1,071	1,415	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1955	397	963	1,360	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1960	510	1,098	1,608	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	NA	NA	NA
1965	672	1,387	2,059	NA	1	1	2	NA	NA	NA
1970	856	1,777	2,634	NA	2	4	6	NA	NA	NA
1975	1,034	2,120	3,155	NA	11	23	34	NA	NA	NA
1980	953	1,948	2,900	NA	17	35	53	NA	NA	NA
1981	900	1,858	2,758	NA	19	40	59	NA	NA	NA
1982	1,066	2,200	3,266	NA	17	34	51	NA	NA	NA
1983	1,144	2,383	3,527	NA	21	43	64	(s)	(s)	(s)
1984	1,107	2,279	3,386	NA	26	54	81	(s)	(s)	(s)
1985	970	2,000	2,970	NA	32	66	97	(s)	(s)	(s)
1986	1,003	2,068	3,071	NA	35	73	108	(s)	(s)	(s)
1987	863	1,772	2,635	NA	37	76	112	(s)	(s)	(s)
1988	771	1,563	2,334	NA	35	71	106	(s)	(s)	(s)
1989	^e 928	1,909	2,837	9	ⁱ 50	102	162	^j 7	15	22
1990	999	2,047	3,046	10	53	108	171	10	19	29
1991	986	2,030	3,016	11	54	112	178	10	21	31
1992	864	1,754	2,617	12	55	112	179	10	20	30
1993	957	1,935	2,892	13	57	116	186	10	21	31
1994	888	1,796	2,683	13	53	107	173	12	24	36
1995	1,061	2,145	3,205	14	46	92	152	11	22	33
1996	1,185	2,405	3,590	15	49	99	163	11	22	33
1997	1,216	2,424	3,640	16	50	100	167	11	22	34
1998	1,103	2,194	3,297	18	50	100	168	10	21	31
1999	1,090	2,177	3,268	19	51	101	171	15	31	46
2000	940	1,871	2,811	21	48	96	164	19	38	57
2001	740	1,502	2,242	22	47	95	164	23	47	70
2002	902	1,787	2,689	24	49	98	171	35	70	105
2003	941	1,851	2,793	27	49	97	173	38	75	113
2004	916	1,773	2,688	30	51	98	178	48	93	142
2005	922	1,781	2,703	34	50	97	181	61	117	178
2006	987	1,882	2,869	37	50	95	181	91	173	264
2007	845	1,602	2,446	41	50	95	186	118	223	341
2008	869	1,642	2,511	46	51	96	192	189	357	546
2009	933	1,736	2,669	54	51	95	200	252	469	721
2010	888	1,651	2,539	60	52	97	208	323	600	923
2011	1,090	2,013	3,103	64	52	97	212	410	758	1,168
2012	943	1,686	2,629	64	53	95	212	480	860	1,340
2013	916	1,646	2,562	64	54	97	214	573	1,029	1,601
2014	885	1,582	2,467	64	54	97	214	620	1,108	1,728
2015	850	1,471	2,321	64	54	94	212	651	1,127	1,777
2016	914	1,559	2,472	64	54	92	210	774	1,321	2,096
2017	1,025	1,742	2,767	64	54	92	210	868	1,475	2,343
2018	995	1,692	2,688	64	57	97	218	938	1,595	2,533

^a Conventional hydroelectricity net generation. Through 1989, also includes hydroelectric pumped storage.

^b Geothermal heat pump and direct use energy; and geothermal electricity net generation.

^c Wind electricity net generation.

^d Electricity net generation in kilowatt-hours (kWh) multiplied by 3,412 Btu/kWh, the heat content of electricity (see Table A6).

^e Through 1988, data are for electric utilities and industrial plants. Beginning in 1989, data are for electric utilities, independent power producers, commercial plants, and industrial plants.

^f Equals the difference between the fossil-fuel equivalent value of electricity and the captured energy consumed as electricity. The fossil-fuel equivalent value of electricity equals electricity net generation in kilowatt-hours multiplied by the total fossil fuels heat rate factors (see Table A6). The captured energy consumed as electricity equals electricity net generation in kilowatt-hours multiplied by 3,412 Btu/kWh, the heat content of electricity (see Table A6).

^g Electricity net generation in kilowatt-hours multiplied by the total fossil fuels

heat rate factors (see Table A6).

^h Geothermal heat pump and direct use energy.

ⁱ Through 1988, data are for electric utilities only. Beginning in 1989, data are for electric utilities, independent power producers, commercial plants, and industrial plants.

^j Direct consumption of energy; and energy used to generate electricity, calculated as electricity net generation in kilowatt-hours multiplied by the total fossil fuels heat rate factors (see Table A6).

NA=Not available. (s)=Less than 0.5 trillion Btu.

Notes: • Geothermal direct consumption data are estimates. • Totals may not equal sum of components due to independent rounding. • Geographic coverage is the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Web Page: See <http://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/monthly/#appendices> (Excel and CSV files) for all available annual data beginning in 1949.

Sources: • **Conventional Hydroelectric Power** and **Wind**: Tables 7.2a, 10.1, and A6. • **Geothermal**: Tables 7.2a, 10.1, 10.2a, 10.2b, and A6.

Table E1b. Noncombustible Renewable Primary Energy Consumption: Solar and Total
(Trillion Btu)

	Solar ^a						Total ^b			
	Distributed ^c			Utility-Scale ^d			Total Primary Energy ⁱ	Captured Energy ^j	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^g	Total Primary Energy ⁱ
	Direct Consumption ^e	Transformed Into Electricity ^f	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^g	Transformed Into Electricity ^{f,h}	Adjustment for Fossil Fuel Equivalence ^g	Total Primary Energy ⁱ				
1950	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	344	1,071	1,415	
1955	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	397	963	1,360	
1960	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	510	1,098	1,608	
1965	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	673	1,388	2,061	
1970	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	858	1,781	2,639	
1975	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1,045	2,143	3,188	
1980	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	970	1,983	2,953	
1981	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	920	1,898	2,817	
1982	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1,082	2,234	3,316	
1983	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1,165	2,426	3,591	
1984	NA	NA	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	1,133	2,334	3,467	
1985	NA	NA	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	1,002	2,066	3,068	
1986	NA	NA	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	1,038	2,141	3,179	
1987	NA	NA	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	900	1,847	2,747	
1988	NA	NA	NA	(s)	(s)	(s)	807	1,634	2,441	
1989	52	(s)	(s)	^h 1	2	54	1,047	2,029	3,075	
1990	55	(s)	(s)	1	3	59	1,128	2,177	3,305	
1991	56	(s)	(s)	2	3	62	1,120	2,166	3,286	
1992	58	(s)	(s)	1	3	63	1,000	1,889	2,889	
1993	60	(s)	(s)	2	3	65	1,099	2,075	3,173	
1994	62	(s)	(s)	2	3	67	1,029	1,931	2,960	
1995	63	(s)	(s)	2	3	68	1,196	2,263	3,458	
1996	63	(s)	(s)	2	4	69	1,325	2,531	3,856	
1997	62	(s)	1	2	3	68	1,358	2,551	3,909	
1998	61	(s)	1	2	3	67	1,245	2,319	3,564	
1999	60	(s)	1	2	3	66	1,237	2,313	3,550	
2000	57	(s)	1	2	3	63	1,087	2,009	3,096	
2001	55	(s)	1	2	4	62	890	1,648	2,538	
2002	53	1	1	2	4	60	1,066	1,960	3,025	
2003	51	1	1	2	4	58	1,109	2,028	3,138	
2004	50	1	2	2	4	58	1,097	1,969	3,067	
2005	49	1	2	2	4	58	1,119	2,001	3,120	
2006	51	2	3	2	3	61	1,218	2,157	3,375	
2007	53	2	5	2	4	66	1,110	1,928	3,038	
2008	54	4	7	3	6	74	1,217	2,107	3,323	
2009	55	5	10	3	6	78	1,353	2,315	3,668	
2010	56	8	15	4	8	91	1,390	2,371	3,761	
2011	58	13	24	6	11	112	1,692	2,903	4,595	
2012	59	21	38	15	26	159	1,635	2,705	4,339	
2013	61	28	50	31	55	225	1,726	2,877	4,602	
2014	62	38	68	60	108	337	1,783	2,963	4,746	
2015	63	48	84	85	147	427	1,814	2,922	4,737	
2016	63	64	109	123	210	570	2,056	3,291	5,348	
2017	65	82	139	182	309	777	2,339	3,758	6,097	
2018	66	101	171	227	386	951	2,448	3,942	6,390	

^a Solar thermal direct use energy; and solar photovoltaic (PV) and solar thermal electricity net generation.

^b Conventional hydroelectricity net generation; geothermal heat pump and direct use energy; geothermal electricity net generation; wind electricity net generation; solar thermal direct use energy; and solar photovoltaic (PV) and solar thermal electricity net generation.

^c Distributed (small-scale) facilities (electric generators have a combined generator nameplate capacity of less than 1 megawatt).

^d Utility-scale facilities (combined generator nameplate capacity of 1 megawatt or more).

^e Solar thermal direct use energy.

^f Electricity net generation in kilowatthours (kWh) multiplied by 3,412 Btu/kWh, the heat content of electricity (see Table A6).

^g Equals the difference between the fossil-fuel equivalent value of electricity and the captured energy consumed as electricity. The fossil-fuel equivalent value of electricity equals electricity net generation in kilowatthours multiplied by the total fossil fuels heat rate factors (see Table A6). The captured energy consumed as electricity equals electricity net generation in kilowatthours multiplied by 3,412 Btu/kWh, the heat content of electricity (see Table A6).

^h Through 1988, data are for electric utilities only. Beginning in 1989, data are for electric utilities, independent power producers, commercial plants, and industrial plants.

ⁱ Direct consumption of energy; and energy used to generate electricity, calculated as electricity net generation in kilowatthours multiplied by the total fossil fuels heat rate factors (see Table A6).

^j Direct consumption of energy plus captured energy consumed as electricity, which is calculated as electricity net generation in kilowatthours (kWh) multiplied by 3,412 Btu/kWh, the heat content of electricity (see Table A6).

NA=Not available. (s)=Less than 0.5 trillion Btu.

Notes: • Beginning in 1989, data for distributed solar and total captured energy are estimates. For the current year, data for utility-scale solar are estimates.

• Totals may not equal sum of components due to independent rounding.

• Geographic coverage is the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Web Page: See <http://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/monthly/#appendices> (Excel and CSV files) for all available annual data beginning in 1949.

Sources: • **Solar:** Tables 10.5, 10.6, and A6. • **Total:** Tables 7.2a, 10.1, 10.2a, 10.2b, 10.5, 10.6, and A6.