

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