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Commentary  
**Evan Mills**  
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The production and use of energy can enhance economic development and the quality of life, or, depending on the choices we make, erode it by compromising the health of humans and the environment. The notion of a necessary tension between energy and environment is one of the false dichotomies falling by the wayside in the energy-environment conversation.

If there is any lingering doubt, look to the recent statement of the [Global Roundtable on Climate Change](#), signed by 100 or so of the world's most significant companies, including [Allianz](#) (nyse: [AZ - news - people](#)), [Bayer](#) (nyse: [BAY - news - people](#)), [Citigroup](#) (nyse: [C - news - people](#)), [DuPont](#) (nyse: [DD - news - people](#)), [General Electric](#) (nyse: [GE - news - people](#)) and Volvo.

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The problem is manageable if we follow an economically and environmentally driven "loading order" in energy planning. Enhancing the efficiency of energy use is, hands down, the most cost-effective way to mitigate the environmental impact of energy use while fueling economic growth. Burning another ton of coal is not what grows gross domestic product; it's getting more useful output from that energy. As work sponsored by the California Energy Commission's Public Interest Energy Research Program has shown quite well, [boosting energy efficiency in high-tech](#)

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Inefficient energy use is what's bad for the economy, as is the collateral damage in terms of pollution, erosion of water resources, and international security that accompanies old-school fossil fuel and nuclear solutions on the supply side. Even in developing countries, growth in energy use is not synonymous with increased wealth or well-being. A potent case in point is how solar-powered white LED lighting is poised to replace costly and wasteful kerosene lighting for the [1.6 billion people lacking electricity](#). Contrary to images of "going back to the Stone Age," this form of energy efficiency actually increases the levels of illumination (and thus literacy), while trimming greenhouse gas emissions, indoor air pollution and energy bills that mire the poor in poverty.

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Another way that energy and environment come into conflict is when energy systems themselves become vulnerable to climate change. Central electric power plants, in particular, are highly dependent on vast quantities of cooling water that will become scarcer under climate change. Related problems were evidenced by the closures of

central power plants across Europe during the heat wave of 2003 because river water temperatures rose to levels where cooling was not possible or environmentally acceptable. In contrast, maximizing emerging energy-efficient technologies and water-wise renewable energy sources ( biofuels, wind, and solar in particular) enhance disaster resilience and environmental protection.

Evan Mills, Ph.D., is a staff scientist at the U.S. Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and contributor to the recent assessment by the "Intergovernmental Climate Change" report.

Interviewed by Tom Van Riper

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