

## **Book Review**

*Renewable Energy Policy and Politics:  
A Handbook for Decision-Making*  
Karl Mallon  
(Earthscan, 288 pp., \$75)

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Renewable energy technology and “green collar jobs” were focal points of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. As president, Obama demonstrated his commitment to renewable energy when he signed the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA), allotting \$16.8 billion for energy efficiency and renewable energy programs (CBO 2009). In light of President Obama’s commitment to renewable energy technologies, and the plentiful funding dedicated to expanding their presence in the U.S. energy market, it is useful to examine previous renewable energy policies and extract lessons for future policymaking.

In his book, *Renewable Energy Policy and Politics: A handbook for decision-making*, Karl Mallon (2006) seeks to prepare renewable energy proponents from the ranks of industry, government, and civil society for the journey to sound renewable energy policy. To help proponents in their quest, Mallon identifies the myths, pitfalls, and oversights that he observed in failed renewable energy policies across the globe. He then outlines 10 features of successful renewable energy markets to guide policymaking for future energy programs. Finally, he describes the political landscape that confronts renewable energy policy proponents by identifying stakeholders and suggesting ways to maximize the “positive space for decision-makers

to make positive decisions” (3). By identifying the failures of past policies, providing recommendations on how to avoid them, and describing the political landscape, Mallon has developed a useful examination of previous renewable energy policies from which the Obama administration and Congress can extract lessons for future policymaking.

Mallon’s academic training is strictly scientific—he earned degrees in physics and engineering. His extensive experience in the policy world, as director of Greenpeace Energy Solutions, founder of the Transition Institute, an energy think tank, and director of an energy policy consulting firm, informs his policy analysis. Drawing on his scientific and policy background, Mallon justifies the need for policy intervention on behalf of renewable energy technologies due to their unique circumstance compared to other technology markets. He makes an intriguing comparison when noting that, at their inception, mobile telephones and desktop computers were new products for which there were no predecessors. Conversely, renewable energy technology entered an existing market dominated by the market’s original technology, fossil fuel. Moreover, the fossil fuel market boasts large, powerful, well-funded competitors with considerable political influence. Finally, fossil fuel technology is cheaper and more flexible because of the existing infrastructure, such as gasoline fueling stations, which the private and public sectors built for its utilization. Despite this seemingly problematic setting, Mallon believes renewable energy technologies will overcome technologies that use costly fossil fuels because renewable energy take advantage of free resources, such as air and sunlight. His book is an instructive contribution toward achieving that end.

Before addressing successful renewable energy policies, Mallon puts “the dirty washing out for all to see” by examining the myths, pitfalls, and oversights that plagued past policies (32). Mallon argues that the long-held approach of relying solely on the free market to develop renewable energy technologies is built upon a series of myths that he seeks to dispel. This approach is captured by Ben Lieberman of The Heritage Foundation when he argues “the winners are the [technologies] that do not need Washington’s help” (Lieberman 2009). Mallon’s response to arguments like Lieberman’s is that government has the unique ability to enact policies that provide

secure markets by distributing the costs of renewable energy development to consumers, thereby ensuring that price impact is minimized. In this section, Mallon clearly establishes his position in favor of government support for renewable energy technology over an approach that solely relies on the free market to develop renewable energy technology.

Having addressed the myths, Mallon next identifies common pitfalls of failed policies. Of particular interest among the pitfalls he identifies is government “technology neutrality,” or refraining from favoring a particular renewable energy technology. Technology neutrality is controversial and central to the free market approach that Lieberman advocates, requiring unadulterated competition between technologies until a winner emerges. Mallon believes technology neutrality should be avoided because he views policies that fail to clearly define which technologies or groups of technologies they support as risky. Such risks include unnecessarily funding projects that would have been built anyway, such as high-efficiency coal plants, or projects that are so large that they soak up all the government funding, leaving little behind for other projects. Mallon’s opposition to the controversial topic of technology neutrality amplifies his stance in favor of government support for renewable energy.

Finally, Mallon identifies oversights he believes were made by past renewable energy policies. One important issue these policies often overlooked is easing fears about the impacts of renewable energy projects on nearby communities. Public resistance to wind turbines along the coasts of Massachusetts and Delaware are examples of the fear surrounding renewable energy projects. Property owners worry that the presence of turbines would negatively impact property values and views of the horizon. To avoid inciting such resistance, Mallon recommends directly involving the community in renewable energy projects. An example of this occurred in Sydthy, Denmark, when renewable energy advocates convinced members of the community to allow the installation of the highest concentration of wind turbines in the world by offering them shares in the cooperative that owns the turbines. Mallon believes that renewable energy advocates could avoid the type of public resistance seen in Massachusetts and Delaware by employing strategies similar to that used in Sydthy. Mallon’s recommen-

dition to engage communities early in the development process is sound advice for renewable energy advocates who want to ensure their efforts are not thwarted.

Having provided a thorough investigation of these myths, pitfalls, and oversights, Mallon outlines 10 features of successful renewable energy markets to provide a framework that will help policymakers design and implement successful renewable energy policies. He divides them into three categories: drivers, contexts, and society. The first category, “drivers,” addresses the pitfalls by collectively mapping out a framework within which the government’s preferred technologies can emerge and thrive. The second category, “contexts,” discusses the overlooked importance of legal processes by providing an overview of the “current and potential obstacles,” making it easier to identify which interventions are required. The final category, “society,” focuses on equalizing the distribution cost-benefit risks to the community. This concept encourages informing local communities about the impacts of renewable projects and incentivizing their development to assuage fears of renewable energy projects. Mallon believes experiences throughout the world demonstrate that overlooking features of this framework will undermine renewable energy efforts. While Mallon’s framework carries the endorsement of his extensive scientific and policy expertise, if he wants U.S. policymakers to adopt his assertion that overlooking features of the framework is a detriment to renewable energy efforts, he should substantiate his arguments through a robust systematic analysis of policies in a separate book or paper. The limited empirical support Mallon provides for his assertions undermines the degree of deference he demands, rendering his outline a useful list of suggestions at best.

Having outlined his 10 key features, Mallon confronts the political landscape facing renewable energy policy proponents. He first identifies the stakeholders, or groups that can “experience direct economic, indirect economic, environmental, and social impacts” (118). Most notable among these stakeholders are businesses, non-governmental organizations, and governments. Mallon recommends that proponents engage these stakeholders at the highest, most strategic levels of project and policy development to prevent a wasteful “project-by-project approach” (118). Mallon be-

believes engaging these stakeholders is critical to successful renewable energy policies because, though many will embrace the policies as opportunities, others will resist them as threats to the status quo in which they thrive. Mallon's argument that proponents can make allies of both camps by engaging stakeholders early in the process to prevent conflicts later on is akin to his logic regarding local communities and is equally as persuasive.

Mallon concludes his analysis with instructions on maximizing the "positive space for decision-makers to make positive decisions" (3) by developing strategies to achieve renewable energy policies that comply with his framework. Mallon provides answers to questions he received from a friend at the environmental advocacy group Greenpeace as a guide to help the reader understand his strategy. Mallon wrote the book in 2006, before the November midterm elections in which the Democrats gained control of Congress and well before the 2008 election when the Democrats gained the White House. It appears that the pre-2006 Republican-dominated political environment prompted Mallon to select grassroots tactics to influence policymakers. Mallon's tactics for persuading lawmakers are not as necessary in today's political environment, where the U.S. president and Congress placed an emphasis on renewable energy in the recent stimulus legislation. Therefore, this section of Mallon's handbook is less instructive for renewable energy proponents than the preceding sections. Those sections' focus on policy design and implementation are better suited to today's political environment where policymakers are ready to make positive decisions on renewable energy.

Judging by the level of specificity with which the ARRA allocated funding for renewable energy technologies, such as \$2.5 billion to accelerate the construction of solar, wind, and geothermal generation facilities, the government is clearly not dissuaded from action by the myth of technology neutrality, nor any other that Mallon identifies (DOE 2009). Mallon's grassroots advocacy tactics are also unnecessary with renewable energy allies in the White House and Congress already making the issue a government priority. Despite these shortcomings, Mallon's framework for successful renewable energy markets is a useful reference for policymakers, though by no means a proven checklist for success in the United States.

Moreover, Mallon's descriptions of pitfalls and oversights provide intriguing examinations of status quo concepts, like technology neutrality, which deserve consideration for future policymaking. In particular, Mallon offers sound advice in advocating for early engagement of communities targeted for renewable projects, and stakeholders at high levels, to assuage fears and prevent conflicts before project development begins.

If the sizeable allocation of stimulus funding for renewable energy in the ARRA is any indication of policymakers' interest in renewable energy, there will clearly be much policy work ahead on the issue. In those efforts, the Obama administration and Congress could glean some value from Mallon's framework for successful renewable energy markets; however, they would greatly benefit from examining the pitfalls and oversights Mallon identifies to make positive decisions on renewable energy.

## References

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