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Pie in the Sky

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Feb 21, 2025



Denying reality is what humans do best. Despite being an obvious flaw, it's surely a trait that evolved in us because it benefited us in some way. Some [speculate](#) it evolved in concert with an awareness of our mortality—just the right combination to keep us taking risks (also evolutionarily advantageous) and yet allow us to make plans for the future. We will likely never know why we humans are so good at denying reality; we must accept that we are, that's what we do, and work hard to minimize its impact.

One of the ways we [deny reality is with language](#). Finding the ways we humans use language to deny reality is a hobby of mine, in part because I find denial of the reality of the predicament we're in so fascinating (in a "wow, we humans sure are flawed" way).

An article that found its way into my browser window this morning is “[State backs green aviation fuel plant as industry struggles to cut emissions](#)” for the Seattle Times. “Green” is one of those words that immediately flags my attention because it is so overused to greenwash... well... just about everything these days. This article is no exception.

It’s a useful exercise to take a look at the ways this article paints some of the most destructive things we humans do a vibrant shade of green, as a reminder of how corporations latch on to the words-du-jour that will get them money and attention and the support (and denial) of the public, in order to sell more stuff.

The reality-washing is front and center in the lede: “Washington state has awarded a new \$1.5 million grant for a planned **sustainable aviation fuels** and **renewable diesel production** facility projected to open in 2029 at Wallula Gap on the Columbia River.”

I’ve bolded the words that led me to investigate further. I found “renewable diesel production” particularly... intriguing, shall we say. Let’s continue.

In the fourth paragraph, the journalist (Dominic Gates) tells us what “sustainable aviation fuel” is: “Sustainable aviation fuel, or SAF, is jet fuel made from sustainable resources that can be mixed with fossil jet fuel to reduce life-cycle carbon emissions from aircraft.” But nowhere does Gates say what “sustainable resources” are used to make “sustainable aviation fuel.” So let’s find out. (Note the “fossil jet fuel” slipped in there; I’ll come back to that.)

A quick search on the company named in the article, SkyNRG (so clever! 😏), and up pops their description of the “sustainable resources” used to make “sustainable aviation fuel” (SAF): “forestry and agricultural waste, used cooking oil, carbon captured from the air, and green hydrogen.” They describe in the next paragraph that SAF is more sustainable because it “emits the same amount of carbon to the atmosphere as was previously absorbed by its feedstock.” (Note a key part here: burning SAF emits carbon.)

I should pause here to point out that “sustainable” means “able to be maintained at a certain rate or level.” So when the company says “sustainable resources” they mean they can continue to use these resources indefinitely to make “sustainable aviation fuel,” meaning they can continue their business indefinitely.

Okay, so let’s take a look at these feedstocks used to make SAF. Forestry waste exists because the forestry industry exists. In nature, there is no “waste” when a tree falls down; the tree lies on the ground and begins to rot. In the process it provides food and a home to countless species from moss, to young trees, to bugs of all kinds, to woodpeckers, salamanders, lizards, possums, and more. But forestry waste, also called “slash,” is the leftovers from logging, an inherently unsustainable practice. Why is it unsustainable? Two primary reasons (although there are many more): first, by logging and then removing trees and slash, logging companies remove the vital biomass that supplies the nutrients for the next generation of trees, so the soil is heavily degraded each time the area is logged. Second is that “trees” does not equal “forests”; monocrops of young trees does not equal old-growth mixed forests.

So, forestry waste is not sustainable in any way. Over time, the land will become less able to grow trees (or much of anything else), and forestry waste is only available as long as we continue the ecocidal practice of logging large quantities of trees, logging which, along with killing the trees themselves, is destroying biodiversity and involves the use of toxic chemicals with which we are poisoning ourselves and the planet.

Agriculture waste is similarly unsustainable, because agriculture is unsustainable. I'll guess it is industrial agriculture, not organic gardens in our backyards, that supplies the agriculture waste to this company. Industrial agriculture is one of the most destructive, unsustainable practices we humans participate in. It is responsible for the vast majority of habitat loss and wildlife loss, including huge areas of deforestation. Industrial agriculture relies on massive quantities of fertilizers (made from fossil fuels), pesticides and herbicides (which are helping to poison the planet, and are also made with fossil fuels). Industrial agriculture strips the Earth down to dead fields of dirt, which are then doused in chemicals and planted with one crop—a poisonous food desert to all living beings, including to us. What is grown there is then heavily processed and turned into food-like substances that are giving us cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.

So, agriculture waste is not sustainable in any way either.

You might be tiring of my analysis at this point. So I'll speed things up. "Cooking oil, carbon captured from the air, and green hydrogen" is next on the list. Cooking oil generally requires industrial agriculture, so, bzzzt, not sustainable. Carbon captured from the air requires massive amounts of energy, along with chemicals, and large factories; bzzzt, not sustainable. Green hydrogen... well the key is in the word "green." Typically the EROEI of hydrogen as an energy carrier is less than 1, which means, bzzzt, not sustainable!

Now let's move on to "renewable diesel production." This will, according to the article, be made from "biogenic methane, using waste from municipal landfills, sewage treatment facilities, and manure from animal farms." Oh boy. Did the journalist not read what he was writing? He's just fine writing "renewable diesel production" next to this description????

Surely, reader, by now you don't need an in-depth explanation of why any of these things are so not sustainable. Quickly, though: if waste from municipal landfills is "sustainable" that means it will be available indefinitely, which means we'll be filling up landfills indefinitely. Bzzzt, not sustainable (endless consumption on a finite planet and all).

Using methane from sewage treatment facilities requires massive amounts of sewage from overpopulated, unsustainable cities.

Using manure from animal farms (a nice way of saying factory farms, also known as Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations, or CAFOs) assumes that CAFOs can continue indefinitely. As we are currently seeing with the "culling" (read "killing") of millions of cows and chickens due to H5N1 spread primarily through crowded conditions in CAFOs, factory farms are anything but sustainable. Growing the feed for these animals requires industrial agriculture; bzzzt, not sustainable. The waste generated by CAFOs is poisoning ground water, lakes, and rivers and causing massive dead zones in bays; bzzzt, not sustainable!

I think (hope?) I've shown that making "sustainable aviation fuel" is anything **but** sustainable. And we haven't even talked about the flying yet. Making SAF assumes there will be jet fuel (made from fossil fuels) to mix it with, and planes to put it in. Is jet fuel sustainable? No, because fossil fuels are a non-renewable resource that will eventually run out. Is making planes and flying them sustainable? No, because making planes requires industry that is completely reliant on fossil fuels, chemicals, metals, mines, refineries, factories... you get the picture. Flying planes emits CO₂. (Remember that the company says their SAF emits CO₂ when it's burned.) We all surely know emitting more CO₂ is not sustainable; climate change (along with habitat loss, wildlife loss, and pollution all of which I've mentioned above) will soon cause this ecocidal way of life to collapse. Flying planes also requires runways, airports, cars and buses to get to those airports, cities, air traffic controllers (I heard some of them were fired recently), among many other things, and is partly responsible for spreading pandemics around the world. Flying is in no way "sustainable."

But it's all okay because they will build their factory on "flat, bare agricultural land". So don't worry!

Oh, I'm sure you can guess that the words "clean energy" appear in the article too. Ticking the boxes, we have "green", "sustainable", "renewable", and "clean". Also thrown in there for good measure is "jobs" and "economy".

And just ignore that \$1.5 million in grant money is but a drop in the bucket of the estimated \$600-800 million required to build this project... which, I'm furious to report, they are calling "Project Wigeon". Yes, the company has named their completely, utterly, ridiculously unsustainable project after this incredibly beautiful bird, who will most assuredly be hurt by the project they are building.