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Kansas's Self-Destruct Button: A Bill to Outlaw Sustainability

By Tom Randall - Apr 9, 2013

Kansas, I love your sense of humor.

It seems like every time the Sunflower State pops up in my news feed, it's for something like this: House Bill No. 2366, a [proposed law](#) that would make it illegal to use "public funds to promote or implement sustainable development."

Kansas, the place where I spent my formative years skipping school to go fishing in farm ponds, is populated with thoughtful stewards of the nation's breadbasket. It also has a habit of turning reason on its head. The state [famously dropped evolution](#) from its educational curriculum in 1999, along with the age of the Earth and the history of the universe, for good measure.

Now the state's "Committee on Energy and Environment" is proposing a law that would prohibit spending on anything that won't set Kansas on a course to self-destruction. House Bill No. 2366 would ban all state and municipal funds for anything related to "sustainable development," which it defines as: **development in which resource use aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come."**

If this definition sounds familiar, that's because it was lifted verbatim from what's commonly referred to as the [Brundtland Report](#), one of the seminal documents in the modern practice of sustainability. The Brundtland Report was the product of a four-year commission set up by United Nations member countries that were increasingly concerned that the world's resources were being squandered and its environment spoiled.

Read the full text of [House Bill No. 2366 here](#).

No, really, you have to read this.

The idea behind sustainable development is that the economic incentives in places like China, India, Brazil, Nigeria -- even Kansas -- fail to account for the long-term impacts of pollution and the loss of shared resources. The result? About [4.6 million people](#) die each year just from air pollution, the

ocean's edible fish are being [harvested to extinction](#) and record droughts [exacerbated by climate change](#) are ravishing crops in places like ... [Kansas](#).

Kansas is the eighth biggest oil-and-gas producing state in the U.S., and fossil fuels will remain a big part of the economy for decades to come. Ask [Dennis Hedke](#). He's the geophysicist who does contract work for oil and gas companies and is chairman of the committee that wants to ban sustainability in Kansas.

Hedke said in a phone interview that he brought the bill to the committee on behalf of a group of "maybe a dozen" people who approached him about it. "The idea of sustainable development and its association with a range of activities is something that needs to be scrutinized in the public domain," he said. Hedke declined to comment on what sorts of activities he was referring to and wouldn't disclose who was involved in the group that brought him the bill.

I miss living in Kansas. I miss the symphonies of cicadas, the barbeque, the big skies and the kindness of strangers. But most of all I miss the government and anti-government officials, who possess a wit so subtle they can convince anyone -- perhaps even themselves -- that they think it's a good idea to ignore the impact of their actions on generations to come.

It's a common misperception that sustainability is only about making sacrifices. When done right, sustainability, by definition, [actually makes money](#) -- in the [long run](#) and often in the [short run](#), too. Corporations that track sustainability objectives [have been shown](#) to outperform those that don't. They are better suited to [manage risk](#) and identify cost savings, and often have easier access to capital.

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Kansas's fuels are finite, and the state's aging drilling fields already produce [just a small fraction of](#) their output from the second half of the twentieth century. That's the energy past. If you've ever stood on Kansas prairie for long enough to get your shoes dirty, you've surely sensed its energy future as it ruffled your hair. The remarkably flat plains have more inherent wind power than any other state besides Texas, which is three times the size of Kansas.

For the record, Hedke said House Bill No. 2366 shouldn't affect the wind industry, because Kansas already doesn't support wind development with public funds. In fact, he says, "we don't have laws in Kansas right now that relate to sustainable development." It's more about preventing sustainable development in the future.

In any event, the bill isn't likely to get on the books any time soon; Kansas's 90-day legislative session ended without a hearing on the bill. Hedke said they may revisit it next year.

Kansas has the wind-energy potential of 3,102 terawatt hours a year, according to the [U.S. Department of Energy](#). That's about [80 percent](#) of the annual electricity consumption of the entire United States. If Kansas developed just a tiny fraction of that -- 7,158 megawatts -- by 2030, it would provide economic benefits of about [\\$7.8 billion for the state](#), according to the Energy Department's National Renewable Energy Lab. And it would do so without contributing to the global warming that's [frying the state's wheat](#) and corn and [pushing America's breadbasket north](#).

That's sustainability. In fact, there's so much sustainable profit to be had in Kansas, it should be outlawed.

Randall is Deputy Sustainability Editor for Bloomberg. Analysis and commentary on [The Grid](#) are the views of the author and don't necessarily reflect the views of Bloomberg News.

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