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SPOTLIGHT

Google's chief of environmental policy explains strategy

By Carolyn Whelan

Published: October 17, 2008



Ethan Miller/Getty Images-AFP

Dan Reicher, director of energy initiatives at Google, says the company wants to see big changes in the United States.

Dan Reicher, director of climate and energy initiatives at Google.org, the for-profit philanthropic arm of the Internet search giant, is spreading the anti-coal gospel in government and industry circles. Since January, it has invested \$45 million in solar, wind and geothermal ventures as part of a renewable-energy initiative begun last year. Reicher, a former U.S. assistant secretary of energy, green venture investor and environmental lawyer, was interviewed just as Google turned 10 years old. Days earlier, Google and General Electric forged a pact to push for an upgraded U.S. electricity grid and Google presented a \$4.4 trillion plan to wean the United States off coal and oil by 2030.

Why energy? What does Google bring to the table?

Google is a big electricity user. So we want higher efficiency and use of renewables in our data centers. We've hired engineers to pursue potential breakthroughs. And we've committed hundreds of millions of dollars to lower the cost of renewable electricity. Lastly, we're putting our money and clout to work in Washington. So we're working the policy, technology and finance angles. We particularly want to work with others.

Energy spans the entire company: from engineers, to product managers, to R&D, policy and treasury people. We're joined at the hip on energy.

What stage companies will you invest in, and why?

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We're interested in the whole spectrum, from grants for energy research, to "valley of death" ventures, to scaling up projects, to standard commercial investments. Energy technology development to full commercialization can take decades. Our money can help accelerate that process.

And we may put money in standard, established firms. Lehman, Wachovia and AIG backed several big clean energy companies and had to step aside. We can help fill finance gaps.

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Talk about your green investments. Will you invest abroad?

We focus on solar thermal, advanced geothermal and wind energies, plus the "enablers," such as transmission and distribution. They are core to moving those energies forward, to get wind energy from the Dakotas and solar from the Southwest to urban areas.

In transit, we're focused on electric vehicles and the enabling infrastructure. That includes batteries, smart grids and applications to monitor and bill folks who plug in. In our partnership with GE, we are exploring other policy and R&D opportunities. We have a plug-in vehicles investment pipeline.

One solar investment, BrightSource, has roots in Israel. And we're looking in Europe and Asia for technologies to improve efficiency and for electric cars.

What partnerships do you seek?

Our focus is on transmission and the "smart grid" and the policy around both areas. The U.S. grid is seriously inadequate. Much of it dates from the '50s and '60s. We need to build a bigger and smarter grid to get renewable energy to big cities and for millions of vehicles to plug into the grid. There's a great opportunity to advance this agenda with a new administration and Congress.

So likely partners include technology companies, investors, underwriters for the U.S. grid rebuild, regulators, utilities and environmental organizations. This is not an easy nut to crack. But we must if renewables are to be more than a boutique energy source.

Will energy become part of your core business?

Energy is part of Google's work. Our engineers now focus on renewables and efficiency. We're also mindful of the opportunity to apply our own technology and tools, as we did with Google Earth, YouTube and SketchUp for our geothermal announcements. Stay tuned.

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Matt Strohshane/Bloomberg News

Obama's even keel holds in final moments of campaign

With one day to go before Election Day, Senator Barack Obama displayed little emotion either in public appearances or private conversations with close advisers.

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