



Mark Stansberry, center, spokesman for the Energy Advocates, plans to tour the U. S. in 2012 leading round tables like this one. His goal is to promote the energy industry as a whole and to learn how that industry can better represent itself in the area of public opinion.

Photo courtesy Energy Advocates

## Advocacy group seeks to improve energy industry image

By Paul Wiseman  
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Other than Wall Street, few other segments of the economy attract as much vitriol as the energy industry in general and oil and gas in particular.

Realizing that just as much energy must be expended to clean up its public image as is spent on cleaning up an oil spill, spokesman Mark Stansberry of Oklahoma-based Energy Advocates is going on the road in 2012 to both disburse and collect information. Energy Advocates is a nonprofit group founded in 1974 to promote oil, gas, coal, wind, solar and other forms of energy to the general public. A former president of EA (2003-2009), Stansberry is also chairman of the GTD Group, an energy investment and trade company with a focus on natural gas.

"What we're trying to do is to get out more and have more hands-on talks with folks ... in different cities, making speeches and hosting round-tables, conferences, whatever, especially in 2012," said Stansberry. "We want to find out what's on the minds of people" regarding energy. The fact that 2012 is an election year means public policy will be more on peoples' minds, but Stansberry said that was not the primary reason for scheduling a tour in that time frame.

"It's more like, the message doesn't seem to be — as far as energy education - reaching everyone," he said.

His goal is to raise public awareness of the need for energy and that energy is not a bad thing. "Really, energy is our friend — nothing moves without energy," he pointed out, listing agriculture, transportation and health care among other sectors that depend greatly on energy for their own survival.

Because Energy Advocates involves all major types of energy, part of the city-to-city discussions will involve how to best use each type, and to use all types efficiently. The discussion also will involve questions of who should make those decisions — should they be left to consumers or should government get involved, especially to promote such things as wind and solar energy that do not currently compete with oil and gas on an economic basis -- and should oil and gas be taxed to pay for those subsidies?

As a supporter of natural gas himself, Stansberry noted even that fuel could need government support to gain more use. Because natural gas is cleaner burning than gasoline or diesel and because the U.S. does not import the fuel as it does crude oil, some have advocated using natural gas in vehicles. Doing so, however, would involve a huge investment in infrastructure to deliver natural gas to fueling stations across the country. Stansberry compared the possibility of government support for such a task to its investment in the interstate highway system. "Sometimes a partnership does occur between government and private enterprise," he said, adding that, ultimately, the market should drive the demand.

On the tour Stansberry will seek out community leaders in economic development, media, legislators as well as consumers, in groups of five to seven people. Some round tables will involve 20 or more attendees. "We'll get a dialogue going as to what people would like to see in their area, what we can do to assist in the education effort. I can see us assisting, especially in the Panhandle and in your area on the wind energy side," he explained. "What we've done successfully is to share the pros and cons (about various forms of energy) and to let the people decide."

As an example of what to expect, Stansberry recalled a recent round table in Kansas City involving 20 or so community leaders. He asked the participants about their perceptions of various fuels. Of coal, the perception was that it is "very dirty." Of natural gas, they said, "We hear it's clean."

"I got to one question I thought was really interesting - I asked them what they thought of the Pickens plan. I asked if they had signed up or if they knew about it. And roughly two out of 10 had even heard of it," he said.

The Pickens Plan, named for its author, oilman T. Boone Pickens, who came forward with the plan in the summer of 2008, proposes the building of thousands of wind generation farms which, in his view, would provide 20 percent of U.S. electricity needs. The natural gas that would have been required to generate that power could then be funneled into vehicle use, reducing the need for imported oil by 38 percent, according to his figures.

Perhaps the most informative meeting was one held in Washington, D. C. with college students from that city. "They told us, 'You're approaching it all wrong' in education. They said that we should be doing more of the social media instead of print." One idea was to do videos on YouTube. The students referred to a video on that site promoting clean coal, which apparently had convinced several of them on that topic. For that age group, Stansberry said, "We probably are approaching it all wrong."

In the realm of public image, he admitted, each type of energy has its cons. For natural gas, it is hydraulic fracturing, for nuclear energy it is the waste, for coal it is miner safety and air quality, for wind the concerns are about safety for birds flying nearby, solar was hurt by the Solyndra scandal and so on. There is dispute over whether some of those issues are overstated, but the perceptions still affect public opinion.

If the public became better educated on the issues for each type of energy they could make decisions on the facts rather than on sound bites — then they could inform legislators of what they want, Stansberry said. In his own quest to educate the public, Stansberry said he does not have a firm count of the number of stops he plans to make, choosing to see what opportunities arise.

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