Wilbur G., Expert on Everthing, answers his critics

Wilbur G., Expert on Everthing, took a couple hits from readers. One, a teacher wanted to know what the heck Wilbur was talking about when he seemingly downplayed the risk of mercury in CFL bulbs. *RM* answered: "Wilbur G. is suggesting that life is full of risks." In other words, you can't be afraid of everything. Turns out the teacher agrees, pointing out that "1.3 percent of joggers are eventually run over by a truck. . . . Being alive may be hazardous to your health!"

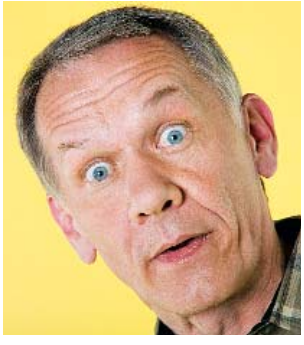
Another reader argued: "Wilber G. got it wrong" about a burned ton of coal producing two tons of CO_2. His math goes: Carbon has an atomic weight of 12, oxygen 16, thus two times 16 plus 12 (one C and two O atoms combined into a molecule of CO_2) equals 44. So one unit of carbon (12) burned yields 44 units of CO_2 or 3.67 tons CO_2 for each ton of carbon.

We put the math to Wilbur G. to watch him squirm. His response was not to squirm:

Being an expert on everthing is made harder by trying to keep things as simple as I am. The reader is right. And so am I. To start with, carbon and coal ain't the same in the real world. Coal has oxygen in it, which combines with the carbon and lessens the weight taken from the air. And oxygen also combines with hydrogen in coal to produce water vapor. Plus there are the impurities that don't go to making CO_2, sulfur and dirt for two.

And not all coals are equal. Lignite, for instance, has less carbon and when you burn a ton of it, produces 1.44 tons of CO_2.

Soft coal (sub-bituminous) yields 1.86 and (bituminous) produces 2.47, and hard coal (anthracite) 2.84. Add the four of them up and divide by 4 to get the average. Answer 2.1525 tons of CO_2 per average ton of coal. Round that off and you get two ton a CO_2 Oh, and fer the record, my name is Wilbur, not Wilber, thanks.



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Read the fine print on conservation easements

Stay out of trouble if you decide to participate in a conservation easement program. The conservation easement is a flexible way for landowners to set aside their property for specified uses for all time.

In brief, the landowner donates the rights to certain uses of the land to an organization and maintains other specific rights. In some cases, donations can qualify for tax advantages.

For instance, a rancher might prefer his heirs or other future owners never allow the property to be sold to land developers for housing subdivisions.

A landowner can negotiate with the conservation group for rights to continue agriculture production, for access rights, wildlife management and other land uses.

The Montana Land Reliance, one such group, indicates on its Website, that no two conservation easements are alike because land and ownership requirements vary so much.

But an issue has arisen among some members of rural electric cooperatives causing confusion about utility rights-of-way.

Manager Jeanne Barnard of Malta-based Big Flat Electric cautions: "Members need to be aware that when they sign a conservation easement, it may limit or restrict the placement of new utility rights-of-way on their own property."

It's conceivable, she said, that once a conservation easement is granted, a landowner might never be allowed to run power lines to a pump at a new stock tank.

Difficulties can be avoided, to be sure. But at least Barnard said, conservation easement landowners need to refer to their easements before they sign utility rights-of-way.

The Montana Land Reliance requests that it be included in all discussions, and the process of granting right-of-way on conservation easement property.

Some conservation easements give the MLR property rights over which the landowner has no say.

In a letter addressed to Big Flat Electric, MLR Lands Manager Chris Phelps wrote, "Conservation easements give MLR affirmative property rights that it is obligated to enforce under Montana law. It is critical, therefore, the MLR be included in the process of granting utility rights-of-way.

"Involving MLR in the process ahead of obtaining a right-of-way easement is much easier than trying to address the issue after the fact, or in a worst-case scenario, risk a lawsuit to remove a power line."

Easiest of all would be to clarify utility rights-of-way before a donation is made.

Jeanne Barnard