Worldwatch Institute reports that windpower capacity worldwide increased by 27,051 megawatts in 2008, bringing total installed capacity over 120,000 megawatts. The United States showed the greatest growth, adding 8,358 megawatts to make a current total of 25,170 megawatts. That's a 50% increase in one year!

The contribution that the U.S. windpower makes to overall domestic supplies is still relatively modest: optimistically, about 66 million megawatt hours per year (at 30% capacity), compared to more than 4 billion megawatt hours generated from all sources in 2007. But it certainly reflects the kind of trend you would like to see. If domestic capacity continues to grow for awhile at a rate of 50% per year, the wind contribution will start looking very healthy very quickly.

Is that a pipe dream? There is no reason to think so, yet. As Worldwatch points out, much of growth in 2008 occurred in the midst of uncertainty about the availability of production tax credits. Thanks to the Stimulus Bill, those credits are not only locked in for several years, but proponents of short-term projects get to choose between production tax credits, investment tax credits, and equivalent grants. The Chicago Tribune reports that there are 300,000 megawatts of wind projects in the current development pipeline.

It is hard to overstate the role that renewable portfolio standards have had in accelerating wind deployment. Currently, these requirements (to include a certain level of renewable energy in the power mix) are part of the law in about half of the states. Target dates are coming up quickly in several states, which might explain the rapid increase in wind deployment. Where could we be if there was a strong national renewable energy standard?

The author of the same Chicago Tribune article argues that wind is developing fast enough as it is, thank you, and that a federal renewable energy standard would "succeed only in strengthening the power and fattening the pocketbooks of the windmill builders that want the mandate." The logic, here, is hard to follow. Perhaps a coal state paper would prefer that other pocketbooks fatten up.

The real questions to consider are, how much intermittent power such as wind can the grid sustain and still remain reliable, and can we develop power storage systems capable of making that concern a moot point?