

DEFINITION OF RENEWABLE MATERIALS TERMS

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Following the report of the Task Force Number Five on Utility of Organic Renewable Resources, the following issue concerning the term "renewable resources" was discussed.

A comment was made in the spirit of the Task Force's stated concern over the awareness of both the public and scientific and engineering communities for the use of renewable resources. The observation was made that materials technology, in today's industrially intense society, is all too frequently conceived as minerals technology as not to include non-minerals such as wood, plastics, agricultural products, and other organics.

Consequently, the attention of the public is often drawn by citation of metallurgical examples when scientists, engineers, and economists refer to important national issues as materials scarcity, materials energy intensity, and defense materials requirements. More public attention needs to be focused on organics as a family of materials of equal importance to minerals and metals when discussing the national issues.

As one means of accomplishing this objective, it was suggested that we adopt and communicate a new or extended definition for the term "renewable resources." To do this, we might borrow the popular and widely understood terms "reserves" and "resources" from the minerals community. In recent years, scientists, engineers, and economists have made uniform use of "reserve" and "resource" terminology following considerable urging by the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the U.S. Geological Survey. These agencies contend that such word-use is critical to better communication on the subject of minerals availability. Such may be the case for renewable materials.

The distinction between minerals resources and reserves is based on current geologic and economic factors. An extensive explanation of these terms can be found in the current issue of Minerals Facts and Problems which is prepared by the Department of the Interior. For the sake of brevity, however, a "resource" is a material in or on the Earth's crust in such a form that economic extraction of a commodity is currently or potentially feasible. A "reserve" is that portion of the identified resource from which a usable commodity can be economically and legally processed at the time of determination.

Although the agricultural scientific community must reach collective agreement, as did the minerals community, on the use of terms, the following example was suggested for consideration: let “renewable resources” relate to a young forest and let “renewable reserves” relate to a mature or harvestable forest. In this context it will be possible for the public and scientific and engineering communities to conceptually quantify the distinction between different types of renewable materials. To this end, such understanding will help agricultural scientists to focus public attention on the need for long term research on renewable resources to accomplish their successful transformation from uneconomical into technically feasible and economically attractive sources of usable commodities.