

The incident energy approach to converting noncombustible renewable electricity to Btu could, in theory, be used to account for “losses” that are due to the inability to convert 100% of incident energy to a useful form of energy. EIA does not publish total primary energy consumption estimates based on the incident energy approach because it would be difficult to obtain accurate estimates of input energy without creating undue burden on survey respondents. Few renewable electricity power plants track cumulative input energy due to its lack of economic significance or other purpose. In addition, estimated energy efficiencies of renewable conversion technologies vary significantly across technologies, site-specific configurations, and environmental factors.³

¹Direct use of noncombustible renewables in the form of heat (e.g., solar thermal heating) is estimated separately and is measured in Btu.

²There is an initial opportunity cost when a facility is first built: water behind a dam might flood land that could have been used for other purposes, or a solar panel might shade an area that could have used the sunlight. But that is a “fixed” opportunity cost that does not change during the operation of the plant.

³Based on EIA research conducted in 2016, engineering estimates of conversion efficiencies for noncombustible renewables range from less than 20% for solar photovoltaics and geothermal to 90% for large-scale hydroelectricity plants. Those estimates are notional indications of the energy output as a percent of energy input at each technology based on typical equipment operating within the normal operating range for that technology.