



Speakout: A clean, affordable energy future

By Bruce Driver and Howard Geller, Special to the News
July 7, 2003

In his Speakout column of June 15, "Overreliance on natural gas means higher bills," Colorado Public Utilities Commission Chairman Greg Sopkin called attention to rising natural gas prices and said that high prices were unavoidable unless we develop more coal resources, drill more public lands for natural gas, and bring more nuclear power plants online.

Fortunately, there is another, much cleaner and less expensive vision of Colorado's energy future. That vision follows the lead of citizens and communities that have already taken direct action to use energy more efficiently, invest in renewable energy and develop our conventional fuel sources more responsibly.

Energy efficiency. We can and should do more to protect Colorado citizens and businesses from rising gas prices. Sopkin completely overlooks the potential for increasing the efficiency of our gas and electricity use. Energy efficiency is the cheapest, cleanest and least controversial "energy resource" available today. Increasing the efficiency of new appliances and air conditioners, installing efficient lights, building new homes and commercial buildings that are highly efficient, and the like will save electricity at less than half the cost of supplying it from new power plants.

A top priority should be to expand energy efficiency programs in the state, extend them to saving natural gas as well as electricity, and maintain them over the long run. Well-funded efficiency programs can reduce overall energy use by 1 percent or more per year, year after year.

Unlike new coal and nuclear plants, which take years to build, we can take steps today to use energy more efficiently. These steps will immediately reduce energy bills for consumers.

Renewable energy. Two years ago, the Colorado PUC determined that adding wind power to Xcel Energy's electricity supply mix would save ratepayers money, and it authorized a 162-megawatt wind farm near Lamar. The recent surge in natural gas prices shows the foresight of the PUC's decision. The successes of wind power in Texas and elsewhere have shown that renewable energy can make substantial contributions to our electricity supply without the need for back-up generation, with minimal ancillary costs.

Conventional energy development. Fossil fuel resources will continue to play important roles in meeting our energy needs. However, our current overreliance on these resources comes at significant risks to our pocketbooks and the environment.

Coal-fired electricity generation is a major source of air pollution and is the principal industrial source of carbon dioxide emissions, the primary gas causing climate change. Further, as Sopkin acknowledges, coal-fired power plants are expensive to build. New plants that can burn coal more cleanly are very expensive. Of the roughly 10 new coal-fired plants proposed for the interior West, not one of them calls for the new, cleaner technology. While coal proponents often tout such technologies to gain public acceptance, they rarely implement them.

While natural gas burns more cleanly than coal, natural gas development is on the threshold of industrializing some of our state's and region's most gorgeous lands - places like the Roan Plateau and Vermillion Basin in Colorado; the Upper Green River and Powder River basins in Wyoming; and the San Juan Basin and Otero Mesa in New Mexico, to name just a few. Opening up more special places to development, as Sopkin recommends, is just not the answer unless we don't mind losing some of the last best places that define this state and region.

The path forward. Both renewables and energy efficiency can help drive down our energy bills without the environmental damage and economic risk associated with fossil-fuel and nuclear-energy development.

Clearly, Coloradans increasingly understand where the future lies. The Fort Collins City Council recently decided to increase energy efficiency by 10 percent and renewable energy use by 15 percent. The city of Lamar is in the process of adding new wind turbines to its electricity mix. The Boulder City Council has adopted greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals, and Boulder residents developed strategies for meeting those goals. Other communities have come together to examine the water quality and surface property owners' rights regarding natural gas development in western Colorado.

We encourage Sopkin to take his cue from the citizens and communities of Colorado and use his leadership position on the Colorado PUC to advance a clean and affordable energy future for the state.

Bruce Driver is the executive director of the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies. Howard Geller is the executive director of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project. Both groups are based in Boulder.