

# The Tens: State is set to revive its green energy leadership

**Special to The Bee**

**Published Saturday, Jan. 01, 2011**

In the decade now beginning, we have the chance to revolutionize California's energy system and revitalize the state's economy. We can tap the state's abundant renewable energy resources, dramatically reduce our dependence on energy imports and create thousands of new jobs. Billions of dollars of new investment could lead to new manufacturing and equipment suppliers expanding or locating in California, and the state can lead the nation in response to the challenge of China's projected dominance in green energy manufacturing.

Success will depend on paying attention to small details and overcoming bureaucratic bottlenecks of all kinds. It will require every level of government, utilities, environmentalists, labor and renewable energy companies to work together like never before. And it will require faith, imagination and breathtaking vision to work across agency and constituency lines.

In the 1980s, California built the first wind farms and solar fields in the world, tapped heat from the Earth's core and turned agricultural waste into clean energy. And then we stopped. Jerry Brown's much-derided vision of wood chips and windmills was abandoned, and replaced by free-market ideology that increased California's dependence on coal imports and a slug of new natural gas plants. The Pied Piper of electric industry deregulation cost ratepayers more than \$20 billion in utility bailouts and left California vulnerable to manipulation by Enron and the whims of federal bureaucrats. Renewables and energy efficiency were put on life support as a sop to environmentalists but were like a green side salad on the greasy fossil-fuel burger plate.

In the first years of the 21st century, renewables and efficiency are once more taking center stage. With Brown's return as governor, California has the chance to get renewables right this time and slash our dependence on coal, oil and natural gas, while growing our economy green and strong.

President Barack Obama's renewable energy cash grants and loan guarantees programs, combined with new and extended tax incentives, have made it much easier for new large solar and wind projects to be financed. The first new solar thermal projects to be built in California since the late 1980s, including the world's largest solar fields, will be built near Blythe on the Arizona border. Because of extraordinary cooperation between the Obama and Schwarzenegger administrations on permitting and transmission, California renewable projects are poised to capture a significant share of stimulus funds, with many beginning construction in 2011.

These large projects are mostly located in the inland counties of Kern, Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial. But there are dozens and dozens of small solar projects being planned in the Central Valley, San Luis Obispo and the Bay Area. This fleet of new renewable projects will be the foundation of a California renewable revival and will create thousands of construction jobs. The debate over whether California can meet its 33 percent renewable target by 2020 by relying mostly on renewable projects within the state is over. Imported renewable energy will play a role, but the vast majority of renewable megawatts will be homegrown.

The challenge for the decade ahead is to sustain the coming boom in renewable energy investment, capture a growing share of the "value chain" of manufacturing and equipment, and have California producers of steel, glass, cement and piping become the core suppliers to California's renewable energy industry.

The past year has seen a turnaround in attitudes about California's renewable business climate, and in the performance of state and federal agencies on the myriad of small details that can make or break projects. Critical decisions remain to be made by federal energy agencies, but an amazing amount of work has been done. Delays and litigation have been avoided because California's tough permitting process and the tight timelines have made these projects better and reduced their environmental impact.

But to keep renewable projects being built in California over the next 10 years, and increase the share of equipment and materials supplied by California companies, the state must do a better job of planning and executing the build-out of its renewable infrastructure. All renewable projects have environmental impacts, but they can be minimized by avoiding high-conflict areas which unnecessarily impact valuable wildlife habitat, and by applying creative and efficient mitigation strategies. Conflict and litigation will always be with us, but can be avoided by early consultation with affected stakeholders and communities, and close coordination by local, state and federal agencies.

California's energy and environmental agencies and its municipal- and investor-owned utilities must end the squabbling and overlapping turf battles that prevent timely decisions and cause delays in getting critical infrastructure built and operating.

Gov. Jerry Brown had the vision 30 years ago that launched California's renewable industry. He has the opportunity to finish the job and transform California into the world leader once again.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

---

*V. John White is the executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies in Sacramento ([www.ceert.org](http://www.ceert.org)).*

*Coming Sunday: The Rev. Jaime Soto, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento, writes about Our Lady of Guadalupe and the possibility of hope. Chris Kelly, former general counsel and chief privacy officer of Facebook, writes about recovering from crisis psychology to change California.*