

Ferguson: Energy Matters

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There's More to Electricity Than Keeping the Lights On

People are funny. They may grumble about the cost of electricity and the specter of global warming, but they really get incensed when the lights go out. Grumbling is just so much noise to politicians. Yet they begin to worry about their careers when folks get aroused. Keeping the lights on is the sole electrical concern of most folks in Sacramento.

The latest manifestation of this obsession came at a meeting in Las Vegas last week when a prominent member of the Schwarzenegger administration belittled the value of wind power on the grounds that it cannot be counted on to keep the lights on - as if that were the only thing that mattered. He ignored the fact that energy has to flow into the electrical grid 24/7, day in and day out.

It does matter where this electric energy comes from.

The administration has issued lots of statements about the need to rely more on the energy Mother Nature gives us every day and less on oil, gas, and coal. Evidently not everyone working for the governor gets it. If we're going to rely more on Mother Nature for our energy supplies, we have to take them when and where she provides them.

Wind is the least expensive of the "renewable" energy resources, and California is richly endowed with wind resources. The proposed wind power development in the Tehachapi region is estimated to provide almost as much energy as the Diablo Canyon or San Onofre nuclear plant. To meet the governor's promises to cut greenhouse gases, the state sorely needs that energy to flow into the grid whenever possible.

It is true that the wind doesn't blow all the time. In the midst of a heat storm when air conditioners are cranked up to the max, Mother Nature may not cooperate by having the wind blow in Tehachapi. That eventuality must be planned for, and the grid operators in Folsom do exactly that. But to ignore the fact that this inexpensive, plentiful, and clean source of energy is available in the state's own backyard is stupid. The state needs to harness as much of this energy as it can.

I fully understand the imperative of having enough energy flowing into the grid at all times. Indeed, it must flow in precisely as fast as we take it out - every minute of every day, not just when the weather is hot. Hydroelectric and gas-fired generators can be easily and quickly ramped up or down to maintain the balance between supplies and loads. But massive amounts of electric energy are required at all times.

Studies have shown that up to 20 percent of a state's electric energy can come from intermittent resources such as wind with no serious problems. California is a long, long way from reaching that goal.

The front page of my local newspaper was full of news yesterday morning about an arrest in the JonBenet Ramsey murder case. Meanwhile, scores of people are murdered in Oakland every year, about which the paper says nothing.

Electricity policy is equally lopsided. The unlikely chance that the lights may go out gets all the attention, while the day-to-day reality of energy supplies is ignored. Is it too much to expect our politicians to care about more than what appears on the front page?

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