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Commentary: This is not the time to panic and abandon California's energy goals



The San Diego Union-Tribune

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We can install Community Resiliency Centers that rely on renewable power now, to beef up the grid, make our state safer from fire and help us when we need it most.

By DAN JACOBSON

NOV. 29, 2019
5:57 AM

State lawmakers have introduced legislation intended to help prevent wildfires and preemptive power shutoffs by pausing California renewable power mandates to allow utilities to focus on upgrading infrastructure and forest fuel reduction efforts. Here, a former Republican gubernatorial candidate and an environmentalist offer their views.

When we are lost and frightened our instinct is to run. But our scoutmasters, parents and survivalists tell us the first thing to do is to stop, get your bearings and then act. You need to figure out where you are if you are going to find your way out of danger and back to safety.

After the last spate of fires started, but before they were even out, some voices around the state started calling for California to back away from its commitment to 100% clean and renewable energy and to instead spend money on a safer grid. A safer grid is important for all of us ... but before we run, let's assess where we are.



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We're in an era of tremendous change, and not for the better. We may be in for a dry winter. Terrifying fire seasons are starting to look like the new normal, giving a whole new meaning to the "Golden State." Oh, and the Big One is overdue. So how do we move forward to address the weaknesses of our electrical system?

The system we have is more than 100 years old, built for a different population in an increasingly different climate. Yes, it needs to be changed. But the changes should reflect the needs of today and tomorrow, not yesterday.

One need is to accelerate, not delay, the transition to clean energy.

Every solar panel, every wind turbine, every electric car moves us toward cleaner air to breathe and a healthier environment for our kids. If you're like me, your mom told you that the first thing to do when the bathtub is overflowing is to turn off the water. We need to close the pollution spigot, so our kids don't wind up gasping for air.



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A second and no less important need is to build an electric grid that makes sense in our new normal — a system that can keep the lights on even when long-distance transmission lines have to be shut down, a system that doesn't rely on moving power across great distances.

Well, guess what? There's an easily accessible system that can do this, right now: microgrids, or Community Resiliency Centers. Imagine a nerve center for your neighborhood — a library, casino, senior center or even a gas station that has solar panels paired with storage batteries. No long transmission lines, no endless timeline for installation, and, consistent with our first need, no pollution to threaten our kids.

Dozens of these centers already exist around the state to help people keep going during fires, especially in rural areas. But what if we built a lot more? On a regular sunny day, a Community Resiliency Center provides storage for clean renewable energy; in a crisis, it provides a lifeline.

In this example, the easiest and fastest route to a safer electrical grid runs along the path to 100% clean and renewable energy. We can install Community Resiliency Centers that rely on clean, cheap, renewable power right now, to beef up the grid, make our state safer from fire and help us when we need it the most.

These solutions are not at war with each other; they go hand in hand.

And this isn't the only example. As more and more Californians live in homes with solar panels, we'll have the chance to make every home resilient.

It's easy for politicians to panic, but they are forgetting the wisdom of their elders: when in danger, the first thing to do is assess where we are and figure out the best way to get out of the mess — and then act. Reneging on our commitment to 100% clean energy by 2045 is a mistake. Better to use the compass of 100% clean energy to map a route towards helping ourselves and our kids.

Jacobson is state director of Environment California.

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