

A TEMPERATURE INVERSION HOLDS SMOGGY AIR NEAR THE GROUND OUTSIDE COBURG.



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DON NELSON



TOM LININGER



GARY MARCUS



GARRETT PAULSON

Conservation Act of 1980 created the Northwest Power Planning Council, an agency made up of eight governor-appointed representatives from Oregon, Washington, Montana and Idaho. In July 2003, it changed its name to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council to emphasize the importance of efficiency.

The council releases a power blueprint for the northwest every five years. Its newest plan will come out this month. "People really respect [the council's] research because they don't have any axe to grind," says Weiss. Despite its good reputation, the council doesn't have the power to enforce its recommendations.

The first question that council members confront is, Do we have enough electricity for the next 20 years? Using computer models to crunch numbers, the council predicted that the Northwest's current energy surplus will last through 2008; then energy demand will hold steady with supply for several more years. By 2024, however, the Northwest will need about 6,000 more megawatts of energy.

The next question is: If we need more energy, where should it come from? Council members consider gas, combustion turbines, coal, hydro, and wind power. They also explore conservation and efficiency as ways of reducing demand.

The council's preliminary draft suggests that the Northwest should achieve about 2,900 megawatts of conservation over the next 20 years. By 2011, additional energy should come from wind farms. The council recommends no new gas plants and no new coal plants.

Natural gas used to be the council's top choice for new power, but the gas market is becoming increasingly uncertain. One reason is the possibility of steeper regulations on carbon dioxide emissions. Natural gas plants produce large quantities of carbon dioxide, which is a primary contributor to global warming.

A more immediate reason to avoid natural gas is because its price is skyrocketing. Gas prices have increased by 250 percent in the past five years. Canadian gas wells produce less gas for less time, and reserves in Alaska, Saudi Arabia, Russia and

Indonesia are expensive to store and transport.

"The price of gas probably won't come down very much from what it is today," says Weiss. "That's why [the council] is saying it's not worth it anymore."

The power council's report may be the most credible argument against West Cascade. Weiss suggests that opponents urge utilities to refuse contracts with natural-gas-fired plants.

"Go to EWEB and PG&E, and whoever he thinks he's going to sell electricity to, and say 'We don't want your power. We want renewable power, and we want conservation. It's too risky to buy from you,'" says Weiss.

It may be daunting for a handful of local activists to influence the likes of PG&E and PacifiCorps, but it's the utilities that create the demand for power plants. "If utilities would stop demanding that kind of power," says Weiss, "these guys would all go away."

A MIGHTY WIND

As the price of natural gas increases, wind technology improves. The areas ripe for windmills — the breezy hills of Eastern Oregon, Eastern Washington and Montana — are desperate for new jobs and property taxes. One windmill can produce about 3.5 megawatts of energy, netting a farmer around \$10,000 per year.

"Wind is probably the next bet for the region," says Weiss. "Wind is a little more expensive [than gas] right now, but once you build it, it's always there. There's no gas and there's no carbon. It's not going to be subject to regulation."

There is no rush to find new power now. Because of the economic recession, many power plants have closed down. As electricity rates go up, people consume less. Current regional energy demand is 10 to 15 percent lower than it was four years ago. The council doesn't expect electricity demand to reach 2000 levels for a few more years, and it probably won't grow beyond that for five or six years. That allows plenty of time to set up wind meters, scout for the best sites, and build transmission lines to carry power from the eastern hills to the cities. An efficient network of wind farms could whirl into action by 2010.

EMISSIONS

Don Nelson, a 66-year-old retiree, owns 10 acres of land rimmed by the Coburg hills. He has noticed that on some summer days, when neighbors burn their fields, the smoke hangs in the bowl of his land. Nelson worries that the same thing would happen to power plant emissions.

A straightforward man who weighs his words carefully, Nelson doesn't fit the profile of a typical activist. Though he is a member of SOV, he criticizes the NIMBY attitude as shortsighted and emphasizes the need for industries and environmentalists to compromise. Still, he worries about the effects that the plant would have on the local air quality.

"When I say I'm not an environmentalist, I have to breathe the air in this hole that we live in," says Nelson. "Marcus' attitude toward siting a generation plant near the need for power is a good concept. I just think there are places better suited for the dispersion from the fallout of this pollution."

According to LRAPA data, West Cascade would emit 825 tons of criteria pollutants every year: 86 tons of volatile organic compounds, 401 tons of nitrous oxides, 52 tons of sulfur oxides, 326 tons of fine particulate matter, and 286 tons of carbon monoxide. It would also emit 1.7 million tons of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. Opponents of the plant argue that the pollution would concentrate in the Coburg area.

Marcus refutes that claim. "The facility stacks will widely disperse the emissions so the pollution will not be concentrated anywhere," he says. "In fact, there are only a few places where it will even be detectable." He says that the facility will be one of the most efficient natural-gas-fired power plants in the nation, incorporating \$18 million in pollution control technology.

"There are no significant health issues [with the plant]," says Marcus, noting that a person breathing near his facility for a year would inhale no more pollution than a person standing on a street corner in downtown Eugene for a day.

That argument doesn't fly with Lininger. "If we have pollution problems in Lane County, let's try and solve the problems," he says. "Let's not cite the other pollution as a rationalization to pollute more."

DEREGULATION

Energy deregulation is the reign of the free market in energy sales. Under deregulation, private utilities compete with public utilities and the government scales back pollution restrictions. There are two levels of deregulation: wholesale and retail.

America has seen wholesale energy deregulation since the George H. W. Bush administration passed the Energy Policy Act of 1992. This was during the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, when the U.S. placed a trade embargo on Iraq, thereby losing 10 percent of its oil imports. Although the act emphasized drilling for domestic reserves in the Arctic, it also offered incentives to conserve electricity and promote renewable resources.

Wholesale deregulation increases competition among electricity generators by allowing anybody to generate electricity and hook up to the power grid. Utilities no longer have to build their own power plants; instead, they buy from the cheapest bidder. Before deregulation,

tion, Gary Marcus would not have been able to build a power plant because he is not a utility. Now, anything goes.

Retail deregulation allows individuals to buy power from whomever they choose. Though it is popular on the East Coast, retail deregulation in California led to the recent energy crisis there before it was repealed. Retail deregulation provokes utilities to slash budgets for renewables, conservation, and discounts for low-income consumers.

Only wholesale deregulation applies to residential consumers in Oregon. In Eugene, for example, all residents have to buy electricity from EWEB, but EWEB is free to choose its power supplier.

EWEB Commissioner Sandra Bishop speculates that EWEB is unlikely to buy power from the West Cascade Energy Facility. She doubts that it would benefit Lane County residents. "It is a bad idea to build this kind of plant in this location," she says. "Even if it's a clean technology, it's not appropriate to have this kind of plant in the Willamette Valley."

— Kera Abraham